

# LESBIAN ART AND ARTISTS

HERESIES: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics

\$3.00

This issue of *Heresies* was edited, designed, and put together by lesbians, four of whom are members of the *Heresies* collective. All contributors to the issue are lesbians. The Collective statement appears below; individual statements by the editors appear on pages 2-4. Third issue collective: Cynthia Carr, Betsy Crowell, Betsy Damon, Rose Fichtenholtz, Louise Fishman, Su Friedrich, Harmony Hammond, Marty Pottenger, Amy Sillman, Christine Wade, Kathy Webster.

This issue of *Heresies* arises out of our need to challenge the heritage of secrecy, silence, and isolation which has been a necessity for lesbians who make art. Because we have no recognizable community with a sense of history, we seek to begin one by affirming and making visible the excellence of our efforts. As lesbians, we choose to create an issue devoted exclusively to work by lesbians in the context of a feminist publication. We understand that in this decision there exists an implicit danger of tokenism: that this may be the only issue of *Heresies* in which a substantial amount of lesbian material will appear. At the same time, the decision reflects our belief that feminist aesthetics and politics would not exist and will not continue to develop without the vision and energy of women whose sole commitment is to women.

Perhaps our greatest challenge as a collective has been to remain faithful to the truth of our experience, its beauty and its pain, as we present it to an audience which has punished us for our very existence within it. Because of our position within a predominately heterosexual feminist journal, we had to struggle against the desire to make *the* definitive lesbian art issue. We resisted this pressure and created an issue which quite frankly reflects the political and esthetic bias of the majority of the collective. We share no single political position, yet biases which informed our choice of material were certainly conditioned by the fact that we are all

lesbians, white, college-educated, and mostly middle class women who live in New York and have a background in the arts. Unique constraints governed our choice of selections: the unavailability of material by lesbians not ready to come out, or not willing to participate in a heterosexual journal; our own protectiveness which forced us to exclude material which we saw as dangerous, either because it presented ideas offensive to our personal experience, or presented ideas in an undeveloped manner, or because it invaded our privacy in such a way as to expose us to abuse and misunderstanding. In each and every instance in the selection of work, we insisted on a clear and responsible exposition of ideas.

The difficult process of selection of material always took us to a confrontation with our vulnerability, self-doubt, confusion and personal pain. We wish to thank the hundreds of contributors who, by submitting their work, risked a similar difficulty. It is clear to us that lesbians have merely begun an exploration of their unique experience through making and talking about their art.

An important responsibility rests with lesbians and with the feminist community: to vigorously seek out and publish lesbian art work in lesbian publications and in feminist journals such as *Heresies*. Without this effort, a feminist world view cannot be created.

HERESIES is an idea-oriented journal devoted to the examination of art and politics from a feminist perspective. We believe that what is commonly called art can have a political impact, and that in the making of art and of all cultural artifacts our identities as women play a distinct role. We hope that HERESIES will stimulate dialogue around radical political and aesthetic theory, encourage the writing of the history of *femina sapiens*, and generate new creative energies among women. It will be a place where diversity can be articulated. We are committed to the broadening of the definition and function of art.

HERESIES is structured as a collective of feminists, some of whom are also socialists, marxists, lesbian feminists or anarchists; our fields include painting, sculpture, writing, anthropology, literature, performance, art history, architecture and filmmaking. While the themes of the individual issues will be determined by the collective, each issue will have a different editorial staff made up of women who want to work on that issue as well as members of the collective. Proposals for issues may be conceived and presented to the HERESIES Collective by groups of women not associated with the collective. Each issue will take a different visual form, chosen by the group responsible. HERESIES will try to be accountable to and in touch with the international feminist community. An open evaluation meeting will be held after the appearance of each issue. Themes will be announced well in advance in order to collect material from many sources. (See inside of back cover for list of projected issues.) Possibly satellite pamphlets and broadsides will be produced continuing the discussion of each central theme.

As women, we are aware that historically the connections between our lives, our arts and our ideas have been suppressed. Once these connections are clarified they can function as a means to dissolve the alienation between artist and audience, and to understand the relationship between art and politics, work and workers. As a step toward a demystification of art, we reject the standard relationship of criticism to art within the present system, which has often become the relationship of advertiser to product. We will not advertise a new set of genius-products just because they are made by women. We are not committed to any particular style of aesthetic, nor to the competitive mentality that pervades the art world. Our view of feminism is one of process and change, and we feel that in the process of this dialogue we can foster a change in the meaning of art.

THE COLLECTIVE: Ida Applebroog, Patsy Beckert, Joan Braderman, Mary Beth Edelson, Su Friedrich, Janet Froelich, Harmony Hammond, Sue Heinemann, Elizabeth Hess, Joyce Kozloff, Arlene Ladden, Lucy Lippard, Marty Pottenger, Miriam Schapiro, Amy Sillman, Joan Snyder, Elke Solomon, Pat Steir, May Stevens, Susana Torre, Elizabeth Weatherford, Sally Webster, Nina Yankowitz.

PICTURE CAPTION (opposite page): Mary Ann Willson. *Mare Maid*. c. 1820. Watercolor. Courtesy N.Y. State Historical Society.

FOOTNOTES (opposite page): R. Lionel Delisser, *Picturesque Catskills: Green Country*, Pictorial Publishing Co., Northampton, Mass., 1894. Republished in 1967 by Hope Farm Press, Cornwallville, New York. 2. Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History*, Thomas Crowell Co., New York, 1976.



"About two miles below Greenville, on the road to Freehold, there lived, early in the present century, two old maids.

"They owned a little log hut there, and a small piece of property surrounding it, in common. They were supposed to be sisters, but in fact were not related by the ties of blood in any way. They had both of them, in their younger days, experienced a romance that had broken their hearts, and the bond of sorrow between them had drawn the two close to each other in womanly sympathy. Together they had come from the old country to Connecticut, and from there to this place, seeking peace and forgetfulness in the wilderness. They never told their story or anything in fact relating to themselves that could serve as a clue to their identity or past life.

"They spent their time in the necessary work about the log house and garden which was filled with wild flowers and ferns, and in painting water color pictures which they sold among the neighboring settlers for small sums; the highest price being asked was twenty-five cents. These paintings... are unique in the extreme, showing great originality in conception, drawing and color, as well as in the medium employed for their production. Their subjects were generally selected from the Bible or profane history, in which they seemed to have been well-versed. The paper they used was the wrappings of candles and tea boxes, or something of that sort. The pigments were of home manufacture. They would hunt through the woods and fields for certain flowers, berries and weeds, which they would boil or bruise to obtain the color they desired. These crude materials were sometimes helped with the addition of brick dust, and in fact by anything that these primitive artists found suitable for the work in hand.

"The lady known as Miss Wilson (sic) was the artist-in-chief; the other, Miss Brundage (sic), the farmer and housekeeper. . . . Their paintings are scattered, by purchase, from Canada to Mobile and are now highly prized by the owners."<sup>1</sup>

Mary Ann Willson and Miss Brundage are more familiar to lesbians as "Patience" and "Sarah," subjects of the fictional biography by Alma Routsong (pseudonym Isabel Miller), self-published for the first time in 1967 as *A Place For Us*. Information about these women is hard to find; a few of the paintings are reproduced in the December, 1955, issue of *American Heritage*; the New York Historical Society owns "Mare Maid," but has no supporting documents on Willson's life. Most of the available information was included in a 1976 issue of *Antiques* magazine.

In an interview with Jonathan Katz which appears in *Gay American History*, Alma Routsong describes her discovery of Willson and Brundage and discusses the problems she faced in trying to market a positive lesbian novel in the 1960's. The following is an excerpt from their conversation:

"My lover and I were touring New York State and were visiting the folk art museum at Cooperstown. I was wandering through it, not really concentrating on anything, when my lover . . . called me back, pointing to this picture of a mermaid by Mary Ann Willson. There was a card beside it that said Miss Willson and her 'farmerette' companion lived and worked together in Greenville Town, Greene County, New York, circa 1820. Then we went into the next room—a small library—and found a book by Lipman and Winchester, called *Primitive Painters in America*, with a short piece about Mary Ann Willson. It said that she and Miss Brundage had a "romantic attachment." I was absolutely taken by it. I didn't want to travel any more. I didn't want to see Harriet Tubman's bed. I wanted to go home and research Willson and Brundage, find out all about them, and write a book about them."<sup>2</sup>

# From The Lesbian Issue Collective:

I'm a writer who struggles constantly with the urge to remain silent.

And I understood our collective process as a struggle with silence. Like an individual isolated lesbian, we worked first on self-validation. We talked about the famous respected closet cases—could we get them to come out or figure some way to claim them. (Claiming the “great ones” is a way for a despised group to feel good about itself.) And we spent many many meetings doing consciousness-raising on what it means to be lesbian artists—talking, some of us, about issues we had never discussed before. My excitement in working on this issue of *Heresies* centered around the hope that many lesbian artists would write us, share their work, and contribute to this dialogue.

The standard I used in judging work was based on my wish to be inclusive—to present as much diversity as possible, to present clearly articulated articles even if I disagreed with their content.

Others in the collective felt differently. This we discovered as we worked and worked and no longer had time just to talk to each other. We had been too busy when we started—discussing our similarities, our struggles, our fears, and our opportunities as lesbian artists—to get very far in discussing our differences.

Cynthia Carr

The only talent I bring to the lesbian collective is my sexual preference, a scorn of self-important pretension, a nose for drivel, and a desire to see to it that we say it like it is. In the past we have done ourselves and our work a terrible damage by lying about our experience. Driven by a need for the comfort of a common political position, we have all too often allowed rhetoric to pass for truth. Seeking an accommodation with the straight world, we have lied about our essential difference. And in a spirit of loyalty we have compromised ourselves by supporting thinking and work which is simply bad. There is very little sense of humor in us. We have, by this excusable example, leaned heavily on many closet doors which might otherwise have sprung open. It was my hope that with this issue we might present truly good work by lesbians. Now, as I am about to be pasted up and mechanized, I can say that the effort has been exhausting and perilous. And certainly I am too close to the final product to say that we have succeeded.

Betsy Crowell

I usually think of myself as part scientist and part magician with certain skills that sometimes make art. Neither feminism nor lesbianism determine the form and content of my work yet it was only with the security of the former and the coming to terms with the latter (the muse) that my life and art began to be uniquely and overtly me.

Initially I worked on the issue seeking a community to explore in depth the relationship of lesbianism to the artist and to discover what would happen if lesbian art and artists were brought together. Our editorial collective's discussions were some of the most provoking and intimate that I have experienced, yet after each I felt a sense of panic. I know that lesbians have made great art, I know that lesbians have been major contributors to culture, and I believe that lesbianism in the largest and most powerful sense of the word has been central not peripheral to the creative world of woman, yet I was worried that we wouldn't receive sufficient “good” material. I also feared being viewed through society's homophobic lenses

yet I will not obscure the importance of lesbianism to my life and art. The muse and I are inextricably entwined and she is a woman. I struggle continually against any restrictions on my identity while questioning why this culture relentlessly omits and suppresses from discussion and history (even in the feminist community) the essentialness of lesbianism to the creative lives of women.

However, there was a far deeper reason for my panic. After nine months of working on this issue I felt that our greatest unfaced demon was our own homophobia absorbed by all of us in different ways from a culture so homophobic that it ruthlessly suppresses and punished all exploration of female sexuality. This, coupled with the fact that lesbian artists desperately need visibility and credibility, gave us a common unexamined goal: visibility as matured and serious artists.

This is only a beginning. Omitted from the issue is any dialogue that examines the role of lesbianism as central to women claiming full power over their sexuality and that such power is the root of strong and unique art. Do not for a minute imagine that art has to be explicitly about sex or anything so simplistic. I am speaking rather to the fact that a person must be able to put the full force of herself behind her work. Fear of being seen as sexual, fear of the audience, fear of offending heterosexual friends, fear of retribution for creating or being in the issue are only a few of the fears that are real and need to be faced before we can initiate a discussion that begins from a point that assumes that lesbianism is the key to the powerfulness of all women.

Betsy Damon

I wanted an issue on lesbian art and artists that would provoke me; an issue that would challenge all the assumptions I have about lesbians and art; an issue that would leave me filled with questions and with the energy with which to explore the questions further. I wanted lesbians to be excited and disturbed by what they read here, finding glimpses of themselves, as well as a sense of what is missing. What stories are still untold?

What are lesbians? What are artists? In trying to reach a working definition of these two most basic questions, a sense of my own alienation from the task before us began to grow. This alienation came from being forced to examine sexuality from within a patriarchal context. A context which has created distinctions and categories in order to maintain its own power and privilege. The advantages gained by society's “power-brokers” through perpetuating and emphasizing the differences among racial, economic, sexual, and religious groups are clear. The most apparent difference between myself and a heterosexual woman; or myself (white, middle-class), and a Chicano working-class woman—is one of privilege. And for me, as a lesbian, as white, as middle-class, to maintain and perpetuate differences that ultimately exist only to deny privilege to some, seems wrong. One way I see myself as a lesbian perpetuating differences is in my focusing on what is and what is not a lesbian. “A woman who does not sleep with men.” “Any woman who calls herself a lesbian.” “A woman that loves and sleeps with other women.” “What if she sleeps with a man one time? Is she still a lesbian?” “What if she used to sleep with men, used to be married to one, and doesn't now, but can't predict the future?” “What is the difference between a woman-identified-woman and a lesbian?” It was in trying to answer questions like these that a sense of futility and absurdity developed. I am not a lesbian. I make love only with women. I am in every way what society calls a lesbian. I will call myself and insist upon being called a lesbian as long as something called a heterosexual or bisexual exists. In all probability, I am referring to a sexuality that will never exist inside me. A simple sexuality, without reference to another's



gender. All of this is related to the question of circumstance (the time and space I live in) and therefore related to strategy (the means of change): an area I'm far less clear about than that of alienation.

The dilemma for me is that regardless of how I view the role such distinctions serve in this society, I am brutally oppressed by them, as they *have* been accepted by most everyone. The fact that I am a lesbian has a profound affect on my life. (My job, my family, my friends always hang in the balance.) While believing that "heterosexual" and "lesbian" are concepts that directly serve to oppress us all, I know full well that as a lesbian I am intentionally persecuted and isolated by this society. The nearest weapon to me with which to fight back is the taking of the concept and the word lesbian and claiming it as my own. My continuing to work on this issue is the result of that conclusion.

The term "artist" serves a very similar function as the word "lesbian," though the specific effect upon society is quite different. The term "artist" distinguishes between those who are artists and those who are not. To me, an artist is a person who works without sham. One who works with integrity. The three most basic tools are a sense of self, honesty, and imagination. These are also three of the greatest enemies of this society. With good reason all three of these qualities are suppressed in most people at a very early age and replaced with subservience, confusion, and conformity. The expressing of oneself creatively demands not only a sense of self, honesty, and imagination; but time... the time to listen, the time to concentrate. To have time, is one of the most important instances of privilege (and therefore oppression) in this society. If everyone had access to the same opportunities as everyone else—would there be such a creature as "artist?" Art would not have to speak for everyone if everyone could speak for themselves. Because of the privilege accorded to and/or fought for by artists in this society, the presumptuous assumption that some of us whether by genius, skill, or inspiration are better able to express "our" circumstance—I refuse to call myself or others "artists." Accepting money for work and associating with art institutions only contributes to the class system of art and artists. There are poets, performers, cooks and the like among us. These words refer to what we do. But "artist" refers to who we are in a context that inescapably implies a difference that furthers oppression rather than challenging it.

The most important point to me, as it refers to this issue, is that just as the words "lesbian" and "artist" exist within a context and are affected by a circumstance, so does this issue.

Marty Pottenger

I want people to understand that to be a lesbian feminist is to be undefined, complex, groping, newly born, uncategorizable and uncategorized—i.e. not a "Lesbian" as she has been culturally defined. I work and live for the day when the damnable categories of human behavior are gone. And towards this end, I am a part of *Heresies* and the lesbian issue.

I don't for a moment believe that we are presenting (or that we even looked for) any answers or final solutions in this issue. There were frightening moments when I felt that we had to say it all *right now* or never. As far as I'm concerned that's a reasonable and not too paranoid reaction to a culture which "gives us" NO place NO voice NO credibility NO trust. We just have to keep stretching, shoving, insisting, confronting, and pursuing whatever goals we each find most politically important and personally fulfilling. I find all the challenge I need in keeping my faith in the strength of the combined efforts of feminists and in taking seriously my individual acts of survival and growth in this death culture.

I am committed to photography and the written word, to outrageous and humorous art, to women, to the chaos of reconstruction, and to publishing as a way to become visible, to be heard and felt by no matter how small or select an audience.

Su Friedrich

I've been painting for twelve years—as a feminist I feel I've been making "my own" art for six of those years—and have identified myself as a lesbian for four years. We continue, the work and I, the commitment growing stronger, the relationship deeper. As I am less anxious that the work will leave me, or that others won't approve, I step out of my protective world and find myself increasingly concerned with feminist political issues. I know how my work functions for me, but how does it fit into a larger social political view of feminism?

I have to admit that I came to this issue with a lot of expectations. From the beginning, I conceived of a whole issue devoted to lesbian art as political. I had hoped it would give lesbian artists visibility (especially lesbian visual artists who have virtually been ignored), create dialogue and community between lesbian visual artists and writers, remove the separation between lesbian art and politics; and bring an art consciousness to the lesbian community and a lesbian consciousness to the feminist art community. Since lesbian artists are so often isolated, I had hoped that in this special collective context we would take risks, ask questions, explore ideas, and theorize. Like a painter exhibiting for the first time, I wanted to show it all.

Now that we have worked for almost a year on this issue, I have very mixed feelings. I think the work presented in this issue is excellent. The problem is not the art itself, for much strong work has been and is being made by lesbians. The problem is what's missing, and what is missing is a context for the work. I am disappointed that this issue has avoided controversial material and has continued the artistic fear of conscious political discussion. We have avoided a larger social political context for our work, as though it would somehow interfere with the work or take away from its power and meaning. To think politically doesn't mean we can't see creatively.

If artmaking is an integral part of feminist revolution as I believe it is, we should be asking the following questions:

1. What is the role and function of lesbian feminist art in the lesbian movement?
2. What is its role and function in the feminist movement?
3. How does lesbian feminist art relate to larger social struggles for change in a society where lesbians and others will no longer be discriminated against?
4. How does lesbian feminist art affect and transform culture?

The discussion of these questions is far more important than the answers. I believe that to be a lesbian artist is in itself political, but I also think in these days of homophobic backlash, that we need to push further and analyze all patriarchal institutions which control our lives. I feel that we have not allowed ourselves (because we're artists?) to deal with important issues of lesbian separatism, socialist lesbians, lesbian sensibility, the relationship of lesbianism to feminism, and the issues of race and class. These subjects are not rhetorical, cliched, or irrelevant to artmaking. To me they are very real and important in determining the quality of lesbian art.

Harmony Hammond

My impetus to work on this issue was rooted in the desperation and frustration I was experiencing working as a lesbian painter within a very circumscribed peer group. I had begun to do what most lesbians have always done in creating a private world of reinforcement. I no longer believe these pockets of isolated support groups can bear the strain of what it means to be a lesbian in a culture predicated on misogyny and homophobia. This issue was an attempt to seek out lesbian artists and publicize the fact of their existence to myself, other lesbians and other women. The dangers and ramifications of exposing myself and others in a solitary lesbian issue of a magazine whose audience and founders are predominately straight are inherent and menacing. But no matter what the extent of this issue's token quality I believe that the contents pursue with integrity essential questions and possibilities facing all women.

K. Webster

I believe we are lesbians largely because we realize on some level that the demands of heterosexual roles are rooted in a tradition of violence to women's bodies and minds. This tradition is consciously and unconsciously ritualized; it is large and powerful, life determining in fact. Feminism can and must help alter the tradition but cannot ultimately transcend it. Some of us have tried to transcend it, could not, don't believe anybody can at this time, and reject it. Equality is a myth that liberal feminism and theories of androgyny nourish. Self-hatred, doubt, and homophobia on some level are operative in all our lives. In spite of this, and in defiance of this, I believe lesbianism is fundamentally about self-preservation and self-love in a culture that would have it otherwise. The choice to make art is directly aided and energized by such positive impulses.

The connections between artist's lives and their artistic creations have historically been acknowledged, probed and even embellished upon. However, the very existence of lesbian lives has inveterately been denied. The connections between our lives and our work must be constructed and recognized, by ourselves, and eventually by others. It is essential that these connections and their powerful political ramifications be given credence, and a loud, loud voice. Despite my terror at signing my name to this magazine, my convictions are strengthened over and over: the presence of lesbians and lesbian artists must be affirmed. The third issue of *Heresies* is an attempt in this direction. My personal dedication is to all lesbian artists who understandably remain silent, in hopes that they won't always have to.

Rose Fichtenholtz

This issue of *Heresies* has had a particularly difficult built-in problem. *Heresies'* usual policy is not to print monographs of contemporary artists, but the invisibility of lesbian artists and the need for dialogue of every kind among lesbians moved us to consider altering the monograph policy in various ways. Essentially, because we decided to publish only lesbian-made material, the issue *itself* is monographical: *Ourselves, our thought, our work.*

We used a discussion and voting process to determine what to publish. The question of inclusivity/exclusivity has been a source of trouble for us as a collective; it was a problem that we never resolved methodically. One direction that I felt the urge to follow was to print as much as we could, since this issue could be seen as a vehicle by which to strengthen a "women's culture." As it has been defined by some women, a women's culture is based in part on the principle of representation of as many of our voices as possible with the idea that the many voices make a beautiful choir.

However, in the end I was committed to print only that material which I felt was most powerful. This outlook can be and has been seen as an alternative to the "many voices" method of creating a women's culture. I agree that what I deem "powerful" is colored by personal biases, some of which must be examined closely for their validity. But to try to reflect what was "out there" seemed foolish. I felt that it was more honest to print what I believe in; that is, not just what I agree with ideologically but what *agrees with me* esthetically. Unfortunately the usual editorial message is that to deny space to something is to imply its worthlessness, and that, conversely, to print something is to assert its worth.

As an editor I have reflected only my own biases and opinions. I have done so only with the hope that other lesbians will investigate our lives true to their own opinions and values—and that we will analyze our differences with an eye towards our diverse pasts and our collective future.

Amy Sillman

I've been a lesbian and I've been a painter for a long time. I have little respect for rhetoric, politics that squeeze the life's blood out of artists, or theories of lesbian sensibility or lesbian imagery formulated out of daydreams.

I don't like being isolated in this magazine because my lesbian artist sisters out there refuse to come out. Backlash is on its way, but we don't even need backlash—we have the sanctity of the closet.

I'd like to personally dedicate this issue to all the women who we know are lesbians and who have made it big in the last forty years—as artists, as dealers, and as intellectuals—for their steadfastness in the denial of their queerness. The starkness of their lives led me to cherish honest living and to search for an alternate route for making art.

I want to share what I have learned in my twenty years of being a painter and a lesbian with lesbians who want a strong identity as artists. I am interested in work. I am first a painter. I am not interested in formulating politics or in promoting a lesbian universe. I am in this despite my doubts about the productivity of collective enterprise and despite the distance it takes me from my work.

Louise Fishman

When I am making a work of art I am making it first and foremost therapeutically for myself, and I am alone in my studio and feeling usually very lonely. At this time there is only a vague sense that it is also for other women artists and women who like to look at art. And even when I have finished working on it and it is an expression of my own formulated and particular visual bias, it is still not yet complete. Women come to my studio and look at it and see things that I was too close to see and the painting's meaning becomes larger. And still it is not yet finished. It seasons awhile in front of its small audiences and insistently sits before them and I bring people in front of it and say, "Yes, this is my art; this is my experience," until in some way it is recognized, analyzed and absorbed. Then it is finished. It is finished when it goes public, is recognized, given meaning.

Women have managed somehow to survive in a woman-hating culture, but rarely have they found ways to complete expression in the culture. We know better than most that the personal is political because when we have insisted upon our personal viewpoint, when we have insisted upon our art, we have been burned, mutilated, raped and put away—at best, ridiculed. Exposure, even sometimes to each other, is dangerous; fraught with memories of past violence, visions of future violence, the feeling that we will be considered crazy if we let others know who we are and what we think. We have no historical or political context to decide which parts of us remain intact after suffering consistent negation and brutality.

Who we choose as an audience is of vital consideration as long as exposure is dangerous. I sign my name to this issue with a great sense of purpose as well as real trepidation. Every day I am aware that people think I am crazy because I am a lesbian and that violence may be done to me because of it. This will continue long after male institutions grant us our civil rights. It will continue until we make the reality of our experience clear. Women have often had strength in the private domain, are safer there. When we have brought our experience, our work, our ideas to the world we have been repudiated and endangered. It is time to be particular and rigorous in our language and ideas, to articulate our needs and biases, and to insist, "Yes, this is our art; yes, this is our experience," in a voice that can not be refuted.

Christine Wade



Margaret Finch. *Queen of the Gypsies at Norwood*. n.d.

## What we mean to say: Notes Toward Defining The Nature of Lesbian Literature BERTHA HARRIS

*The original version of this paper was intended for, and presented to, academics at a Forum on Homosexual Literature at the 1974 Modern Language Association Convention. The paper was entitled, "The Purification of Monstrosity: The Lesbian As Literature." Since then, I have written other versions on this subject of the lesbian as monster in literature; and have begun to realize that I can only finally complete what I have to say in book-length form. So I've started writing the book. The version below contains the theory and a partial analysis. For examples here, however, I have chosen mostly instances of popular literature—such as Dracula, Jaws, Burnt Offerings, etc. Expanded, this essay on the idea of lesbian monstrosity in popular fiction will form one chapter of the book I am preparing.*

To misappropriate Oscar Wilde's remark about the English and fox-hunting: *lesbian literature is the pursuit*

*of the inedible by the unspeakable.* It is also the pursuit of the unspeakable by the inedible; and it is this particularly. As lesbians are "unspeakable" so is "lesbianism" a taste for the "inedible." Literature (in any form) is like the fox, a luxury; a peripheral pastime, because it is inedible; and so is lesbianism. Lesbians and lesbian literature are unspeakable and inedible. Most contemporary attempts to make both palatable and "speakable" (to put a fox in every home's Sunday pot)—universally acceptable and welcome—are tantamount to grinding up cha-teaubriand into winkieburgers.

To those acquainted with reading (but most people, and most lesbians, do not read) what is being called lesbian literature these days is sheer winkieburger; and around and about that "literature" is afoot a movement to make the world safe for winkieburger—although tree-worshippers on our west coast will not touch it; and ritualists who periodically burn their menstrual

blood prefer to do that instead. Most lesbians (like everyone else) would rather feel than read; they thus achieve their most longed-for goal: to be like everyone else. And that is too bad. Lesbians, instead, might have been great, as some literature is: unassimilable, awesome, dangerous, outrageous, different: *distinguished*. Lesbians, as some literature is, might have been monstrous—and thus have everything. Monsters are, and have always been, invented to express what ordinary people cannot: feeling. Monsters (among other things) are emblems of feeling in patriarchy. The enemy of the monster is phallic materialism, which demands that chaos be shaped and ordered, made sexually economical, around the emblem of a cock. The literature of phallic materialism is about reducing “chaos” (wilderness, woman, imagination, the erotic) into an erect (predictable) order (by means of rifles and missiles, fire and concrete, the ritual of marriage and the double bed; genital spasm). The story is about what it means to be a cock; and what it means to be the other end of the cock. The most inventive of these stories is regularly awarded the Nobel Prize. “Invention” in these stories regularly takes the form of what constitutes the other end of the cock: what form the monster will take.

Most writers of imaginative literature (by which I mean fiction and poetry)—and their attentive readers—do not understand that a lesbian form significantly differing from the patriarchal form I have described is not achieved through sexual substitution. For example, two women (instead of a woman and a man) overcoming parental opposition, surviving the wilderness, enjoying domestic bliss together, achieving orgasm with a finger instead of a penis is only Romeo and Juliet again with two differences: happy endings—of both kinds. A woman suffering in Tolstoyan detail over another woman (instead of a man) overwhelms with catalogues of sexual candor; genital explicitness substituting for Napoleon’s entry into Moscow. It is not that these, and all the others, are not “good” books. They are—and so are the excruciatingly refined recollections of a dear old lady who mistakes the chirrups of a female sociologist for the call of the Wild. Anything is, after all, better than nothing. My complaint lies in the fact that these individual turnabouts of heterosexual reality seem, to many, to constitute a literary expression of lesbian sensibility; and as such distract us from the apprehension of lesbian reality.

The great service of literature is to show us who we are. Put more simply, we tend to behave, and think, as books show us how to behave and think (and I am being deliberately naive here—I do know that movies and television have almost completely taken over the role of books as behavior show-ers and shapers). Lesbians, historically bereft of cultural, political and moral context, have especially relied on imaginative literature to dream themselves into situations of cultural, political and moral power. Twenty years ago, without Molly Bolt, we were Rhett Butler and Stephen Gordon and the Count of Monte Cristo. It is, of course, much more to the point to be Molly Bolt—or Patience or Sarah or Mrs. Stevens. The trouble with this process (vulgarly referred to as “identifying with”) is that while the new lesbian hero is certainly safer for our mental health than Rhett or the Count of Stephen—we do not have to associate power and adventure with the penis any longer; we do not have to call on God to cure us of “inversion”

and wear male underwear any longer—and while we see her operating in what some might very loosely call a “cultural” context of tree-hugging, feminist folk/rock, vegetarianism and goddess-worship, her aggressive, strong, even magnificent image is by and large taken on by her beholder *still* inside the heterosexual/patriarchal definition of moral and political reality. Lesbian literature is *not* a matter of a woman plus a woman in bed. As the devout seek to “prove” a matriarchal pre-history by pointing to circular forms in cave painting; as still others cherish bizarre snippets of human detritus as the foreskin of Jesus—lesbians overwhelmingly believe that acts of lesbianism are positive proof—both in and out of literature—of the existence of lesbians. As though we were spending all our lives in the courts of law, we rely almost entirely on materiality as evidence of truth. It is sexual materiality, of course, that is these days the supreme evidence, not only of truth and love but, indeed, that one is alive. And perhaps it has always been so; and perhaps it is best that it is so. But lesbians have been unable to enact a completely lesbian reality—and therefore, a literature—because of such reliance on the sensational as proof of existence: because we have been the apotheosis of the sensational, defined utterly by sexual behavior and no other kind. As such, we have served an emotionally crippled society well: imagined as entirely sexual, we are also imagined as complete: i.e., a human form (therefore natural) engaging in unnatural (therefore supernatural) activity. Law, basing its decision on material evidence, thus shows what is *out* of law; and makes the divine, which is worshipped; and makes the criminal, which is brutalized—and adored,



Female monster with two heads. From Boaistuau’s *Histoires Prodigeuses*, Paris, 1573.

and for the same reasons the "divine" is worshipped: because of its *difference*. Human beings tend to adore that which they are not, but long to be; or, given the "chance," can be; and this is a wish for salvation—and salvaging. Such a wish, expressed in an entirely whole social context, makes a literature in which heroes appear performing great tasks of strength, love, endurance, intellectuality, suffering. Each task accomplished for the hero means transcendence, not only for the hero but for the culture whose need he has accomplished. The task itself changes from time to time; from place to place; but its purpose—transcendence—does not. The lesbian equivalent of such a hero in literature is the monster.

Monsters, heroes, criminals and lesbians (and sometimes saints and gods) have the following traits in common: an ability to make a life outside the social norm that seems both enviable and frightening to those inside; an actual or imagined power to concentrate which may be either emotionally or intellectually expressed—but whose object is to solve a problem; marks of difference that are physically manifested and both horrify and thrill; a desire to avenge its own (and sometimes others) outcast misery: through destruction or through forcing a change in the world that will admit it and its kind; an ability to seduce and tempt others into its "evil" ways; super-human power.

From boy to man to old man, the male body changes hardly at all. The changes it does incur are hardly dramatic. From girl to woman to old woman, the female body is in constant flux; and to the primitive imagination (which we all have) female physical change is the matter of all magic; the genesis of all fear; the stuff of all mythic and fictive exaggeration. The female bleeds. She bleeds, *but does not die* from bleeding. She grows breasts: breasts springing from the nothing that is chest. Her hips spread; her waist indents; her belly grows huge. In great physical turbulence, she produces life, her self's replica, and seemingly at her will and unaided. Her body can feed this new life. Such a creature with such power—not only over life itself but power over the continuing life of the community—must be dealt with: her power over life must be met with an equivalent power. The most obvious form that this new *invented* power (invented through motives of fear and envy) will take is the power to choose whether the woman will live or die. Her power over life must be matched with a power over her death. This invented power over woman is enacted in various overlapping stages: she is made sacred and worshipped (because she is outside the male "norm"). Through worship, it is hoped, she will be propitiated—she will not turn her magic inside out and cause death instead of on-going life. She is made profane, stripped of her magical properties, reduced to "mere" flesh. In this form she embodies horror and thrill and, especially, evil. For fear that she herself will turn her magic inside-out, the community appropriates that decision and does it instead. In both divine and obscure forms, the woman's magic is under the control of others and she is rendered powerless. To experience powerlessness is to experience death. Further, both forms of control have the added effects of "taming" that which was perceived as wild, and therefore dangerous. For the male to *appear* wild, he must create a contrast to tameness; in effect, steal woman's wildness and use it as drag: become magic himself. And he will become divine, by contrast, if she can be made profane. And he will become pure if

she can be shown (as her bleeding testifies) to be impure. Such a cooptive process is accompanied by huge eruptions of guilt and fear which, in literary creation (as well as myth), takes the form of the monster: the quintessence of all that is female; and female enraged.

The amount of collective guilt by those who hold power over women can be effectively measured at any one time by the amount of "monster" literature that is published during that time. Especially if such literature is popular with the public (as it was in nineteenth century Europe and as it is now in twentieth century America) we can be certain that two emotions have seized the general imagination: extreme fear that those who have been tricked of power are conspiring to regain it—and will—and that artificial restraints on the wild (such as marriage) are collapsing; and a great longing (accompanied by remorse and nostalgia for "real" wildness) for the conspiracy to succeed. While Mary Shelley was composing *Frankenstein*, William Blake was observing the havoc the Industrial Revolution was wreaking on England's green nature. Mary Shelley's monster rises out of "dark Satanic Mills" as pure evil and as a *result* of evil inflicted on the natural: "Oh Horror!—let me fly this dreadful monster of my own creation!" Frankenstein's monster longs to be loved; many monsters feel that love will cure their alienation. Significantly (perhaps uniquely among monsters) Mary Shelley also wishes it could read and write. Blake's "dark Satanic Mills" have advanced into the last half of the twentieth century transformed into sophisticated technological death; and almost daily a new monster is mass-distributed in paperback. Vampires, poltergeists, witches are being refur-



The lion-headed Barbara Urselin, born in 1641 in Augsburg, from Aldrovandus' *Opera Omnia Monstrum Historia*, 1668.

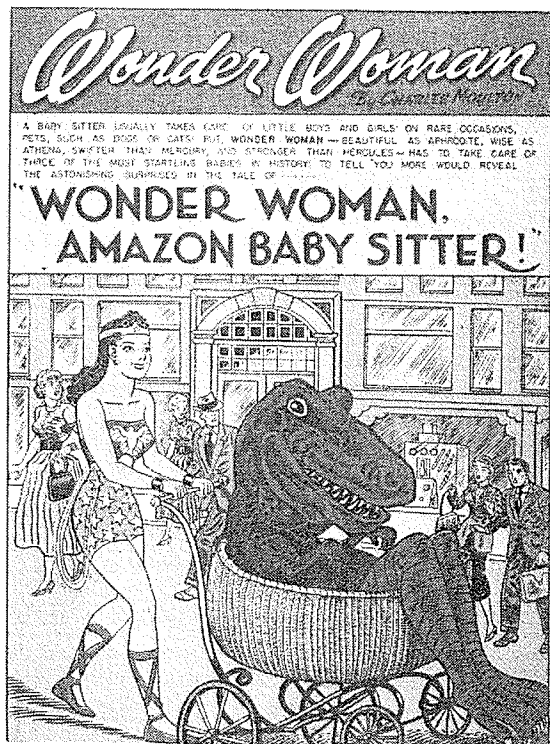
bished in modern guise: Ann Rice deliberately recreates old Dracula as a dream of eroticism; but old Dracula, from the nineteenth century, still threatens his worthy pursuers (intent on making the world safe from "vampires") that he will take their women away from them and turn them (the men) into his jackals. An adolescent girl, abominated because she is "different" elects to let difference serve her instead of defeat her, and turns the "shame" of menstruation into a bloom of napalm. The natural conspires with the supernatural—as it always has through monster literature; and, through the union, produces both a configuration of love that is non-phallic; and of power that is counter-phallic. A maiden plus a beast produces a monster: that is, "unspoiled" nature (unfucked, unsocialized) whose image is the maiden who will find herself (sometimes through happenstance, sometimes even deliberately) in league with the supernatural. Together, they terrify, and must be separated (by the phallus)—one, commonly, transformed to wife; the other exchanged for husband. While patriarchal guilt has invented the monster to manifest its guilt, patriarchal need to reenact triumph over the monster is so far a greater urge. But *Burnt Offerings*, another mass-market paperback, is an interesting switch; as is *Carrie*. Carrie, though she herself is killed in the holocaust her rage creates, seems as alive after death as she was before. "Can female anger be quenched by the grave?" seems to be the question. Certainly, the vampire's cannot—except by the stake through the heart: a long, stiff, pointed object snuffing out eternal life through love's symbol. While *Burnt Offerings* is thematically similar to Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (but thematically only; literary merit is not an issue here); and while there is material lesbian content in Jackson's novel and not in the other, *Burnt Offerings* is one of the few monster tales with a happy monster ending. The young housewife, with the help of the vicious house, gleefully turns into a witch (or witch variant), uses her new

power to destroy her husband and son; and at last can enjoy not only a room of her own but an entire, and rather lovely, house of her own. Blood, as in the case of the vampire, is the transforming agent. Frequently patriarchal guilt will, besides the monster, produce types of men to suffer and eventually defeat her. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Peter Benchley's *Jaws* are exactly the same in this respect: a man of the past, a man of the present and a man of the (technological) future unite emotionally and as workers to kill the being whose erotic rage most threatens their sexual control; and the crucial lesson of male/skill bonding against female/creature union is again reinforced. Of this genre, *Jaws*—whose direct ancestor is the old tale of "Beauty and the Beast"—is the most clearly lesbian. Maiden, beast and nature are fused in one giant, ravenous killer form whose freedom depends upon the wipeout of the nuclear-familied, heterosexual beach and all its supporting structures. And this time it takes more than mere phallic flesh to subjugate the monster: the penis (the pointed stake through the heart) has become great tubes of lethal explosive. As *vagina dentata* grows even longer, stronger incisors, so must the weaponry to blow it up—and teach it a lesson—increase in diameter, length and ability to shoot straight. When Djuna Barnes wrote *Nightwood* she was creating, in the silent, devouring magic of her lesbian, Robin Vote, a sleepless swimmer in the depths of all our imaginations; and her new name is *Jaws*—and her ancient name, Beauty.

But lesbian literature, which, in patriarchy is necessarily monster literature, has begun to take new shapes utterly independent and free of the male tradition: as it must, to produce any kind of happy ending. With only a few exceptions, the old monster is experiencing its most telling re-rendering in the imaginative literature from the independent women's presses, where it is being returned to its original female shape. The old fearsome disguises, the gruesome costumes of terror are being stripped away, revealing what was there all along: a free woman declaring through art, for the first time, what a lesbian is. Much of what a lesbian is, this new work is telling us, is that which has been unspeakable about women. In June Arnold's *The Cook and The Carpenter*, we learn that political passion is a direct result of physical passion among women. In Linda Marie's *I Must Not Rock* and Nancy Lee Hall's *The True Story of a Drunken Mother* the "common" language of the common woman that Judy Grahn prophesied in *The Common Woman* poems is at least an esthetic reality. In June Arnold's *Sister Gin* to be old and fat is also to be a lover. Pat Parker's poetry shows that it is even possible to be Black and stay Black when one is a lesbian. In M.F. Beal's *Angel Dance* and in my own novel, *Lover*, men are dangerous to the lives of women: and so they are killed. Such works, from such places, constitute the beginnings of the future of lesbian literature and serve to show what the lesbian is becoming: a creature of tooth and claw, of passion and purpose: unassimilable, awesome, dangerous, outrageous, different: distinguished.

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Bertha Harris is a novelist, a feminist, a mother, an essayist, an editor, a teacher, a misanthropist and a lesbian. Her most recent novel is *Lover*, published by Daughters, Inc.



*Wonder Woman* by Charles Moulton. May 1957. D.C. National Comics.



## The enemies of She Who call her various names

a whore, a whore  
a fishwife a cunt a harlot a harlot a pussy  
a doxie a tail a fishwife a whore a hole a slit  
a cunt a bitch a slut a slit a hole a whore a hole  
a vixen/ a piece of ass/ a dame-filly-mare  
dove-cow-pig-chick-cat-kitten-bird  
dog-dish/ a dumb blonde

you black bitch-you white bitch-you brown bitch-you yellow  
bitch-you fat bitch-you stupid bitch-you stinking bitch-  
you little bitch-you old bitch-a cheap bitch-a high class  
bitch-a 2 bit whore-a 2 dollar whore-a ten dollar  
whore-a million dollar-mistress

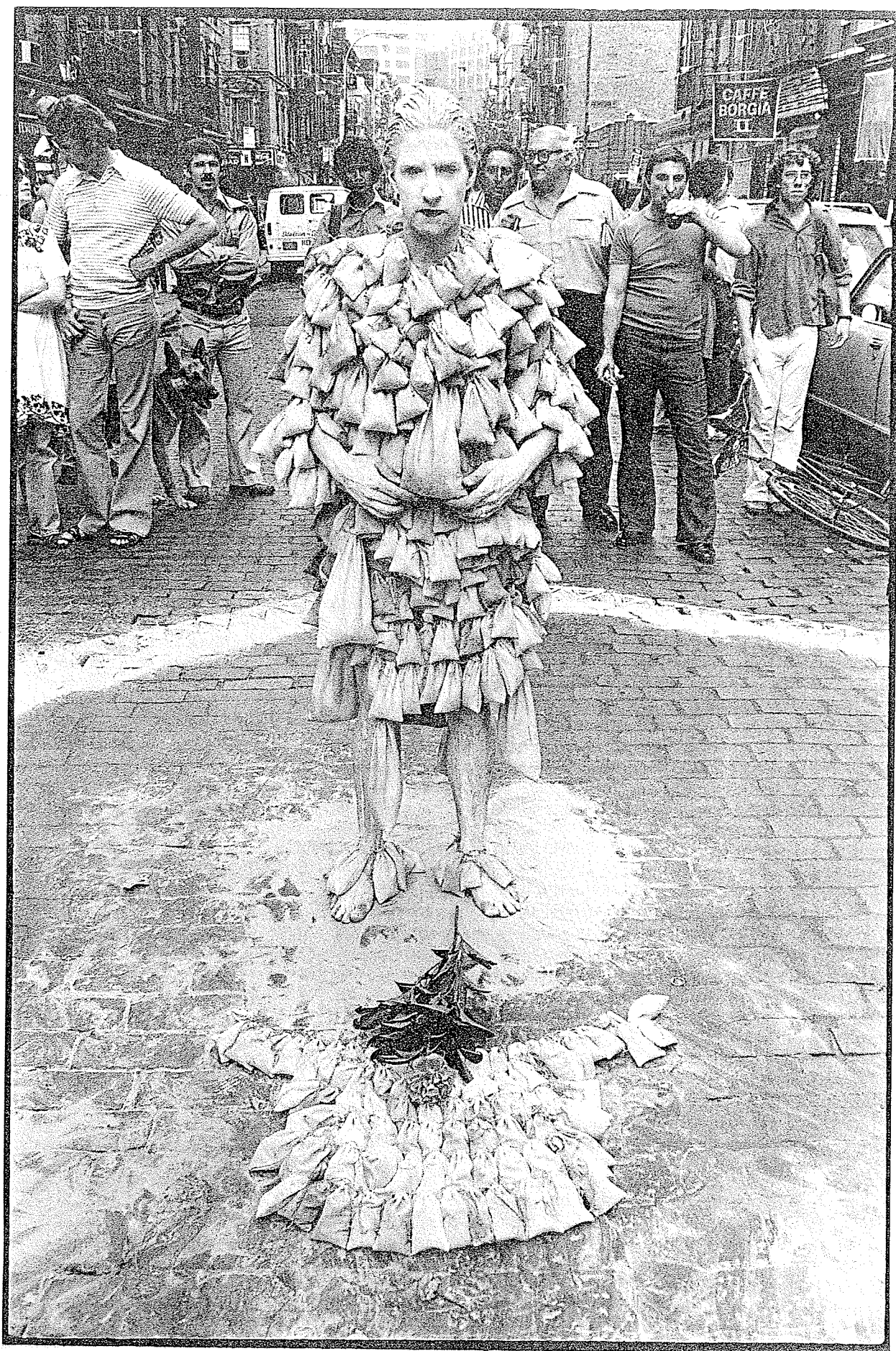
a hole a slut a cunt a slit a cut  
a slash a hole a slit a piece  
of shit, a piece of shit, a piece of shit

She Who bears it  
bear down, breathe  
bear down, bear down, breathe  
bear down, bear down, bear down, breathe  
She Who lies down in the darkness and bears it  
She Who lies down in the lightness and bears it  
the labor of She Who carries and bears is the first labor  
all over the world  
the waters are breaking everywhere  
everywhere the waters are breaking  
the labor of She Who carries and bears  
and raises and rears is the first labor,  
there is no other first labor.

*Judy Grahm*

*Judy Grahm is a thirty-seven year old poet. Her books include The Common Woman and Edward the Dyke. The above poem is from She Who, A Graphic Book of Poems which was recently published by Diana Press. She is working on a matriarchal novel.*





*7000 Year Old Woman. Performance #2, a street event, fully clothed. Photo by Su Friedrich*

# THE 7000 YEAR OLD WOMAN

Betsy Damon

Photographs by Su Friedrich

Who is she? I will tell you what I know about her which is very little. She is my sister, mother, my grandmothers, my great grandmothers, friends and lovers. She is my woman line of 7000 years and she is me, the me that I know very little about. She found me in Los Angeles in spring, 1975. I began imagining myself covered with small bags filled with flour. For the next two years I constantly saw the image with one change. She became a clown and I decided to paint my body and face white. Only after completing the first Sacred Grove, did I identify her as a 7000-year-old woman. While I was more and more in awe of her and did not know very much about her, naming her was the first step towards performing her.

What has become clear is that I am a facilitator for her. I have some skills and discipline but she has her own magic. I learn about her through the performances, that is, through her existence.

## Performance #1: A Sacred Grove Collaboration

Cayman Gallery, New York

March 21, 1977

### Description of the piece:

I painted my body, face and hair white and blackened my lips. Hanging from and covering my body were 420 small bags filled with 60 pounds of flour that I had colored a full range of reds from dark earth red to pink and yellow. To begin the piece I squatted in the center of the gallery while another woman drew a spiral out from me which connected to a large circle delineated by women who created a space with a sonic meditation. Very slowly I stood and walked the spiral puncturing and cutting the bags with a pair of scissors. I had in mind the slow deliberateness of Japanese Noh theater, but none of the gestures were planned and at one point I found myself feeling so exposed that I tried to put the bags back on. The ponderous slowness combined with the intrinsic violence of the cutting and the sensuous beauty of the bags created a constant tension. By the end of the performance the bags on my body were transformed into a floor sculpture. I invited the audience to take the bags home and perform their own rites.

The 7000 year old woman will exist in many places and many aspects in the future.

This piece is about time; remembering time; moving out through time and moving back through time; claiming past time and future time. At the end of the piece I had a certain knowledge about the metaphysical relationship of time; the accumulation of time, and women's relationship to time past. I came out of the piece with a knowledge about the burden of time. A woman sixty years old is maybe twenty times more burdened than the thirty-year-old by her story. While I don't understand the mathematics of this I did feel it to be true. If we had had 7000 years of celebrated female energy this would be different.

During the performance I was a bird

a clown  
a whore  
a bagged woman  
an ancient fertility goddess  
heavy-light  
a strip-tease artist  
sensuous and beautiful

After the performance I was certain that at some time in history women were so connected to their strength that the ideas of mother, wife, lesbian, witch as we know them did not exist.



*7000 Year Old Woman. Performance #2, giving bags away. Photo by Su Friedrich*

#### **Performance #2: A Street Event**

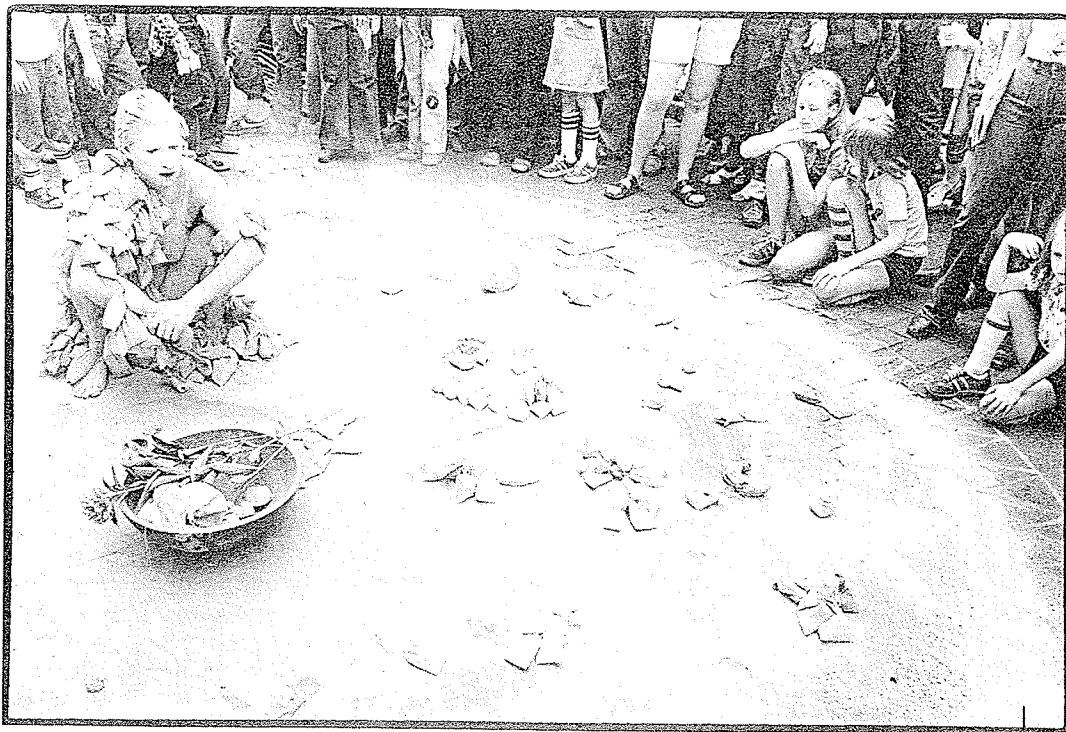
**Claiming a space on Prince Street near West Broadway, New York**

**May 21, 1977 1-3 p.m.**

#### **Description of the event:**

7000 year old woman existed on the street for two hours unprotected except by a sand circle, yellow triangles and her energy. As I was preparing the bags in the studio I imagined her in light colors, part clown and part an ancient spring person who would hang out in the street. I asked one woman, Su Friedrich, to assist me. At home I painted my body, hair and face white and blackened my lips. I wore underpants and a shirt. We began by delineating a space with a sand circle. In the center we ceremoniously arranged all the bags. I stood in the center while Su tied the bags on my body aware constantly of the shield the bags were providing. There were 400 bags filled with pale red, yellow, orange and purple flour. This became an intimate ritual of its own which lasted nearly an hour. When this was done Su left the circle and I remained with my only protection, the bags. There were a few bags left over which I tossed to the audience, hoping to capture some of the clown and establish contact with the audience. However, my sense of vulnerability was overwhelming, I could not move from the center of the circle and did not want to begin cutting the bags off. Friends brought flowers, boys threw eggs and I could feel the intense reactions of the audience. I was in a constant struggle with a group of street boys who wanted me or the bags and could never get enough. They were balanced by the many girls and women who were silently engrossed. Finally I stood and slowly walked the circle cutting the bags away, letting the flour spill out or handing the bags to the viewers. Without the bags to protect me, my sense of vulnerability was intolerable and I returned to the center and squatted to finish the piece. Throughout the performance, Amy Sillman painted yellow triangles around the sand circle. Her activity, more intimately connected with the cobble stones and always at the mercy of the crowd was the only buttress between me and the crowd.

Some additional reactions and notes on the event: Su and I were exhausted after the piece. All that I could say was that I had been a guerrilla fighter for two hours. This feeling was so powerful that it obscured everything else. For two hours I created a female space. However, I never knew until that afternoon how completely all things female had been eradicated from our streets. So totally is this true that we do not even notice that she is missing. I experienced much unanticipated violence during the event, yet I felt that I was a natural person in a normal space.



7000 Year Old Woman. Performance #2, end of event. Photo by Su Friedrich

#### Performance #2: A Street Event

A description by Su Friedrich who assisted in the performance of the event

Betsy's magic circle:

The 7000 year old woman's Sacred Grove.

My temporary refuge, my stage.

Private activities becoming public, intimate gestures between Betsy and me being questioned, observed, encouraged or debased by the fluctuating crowd. Westchester ladies, street tough boys, perplexed and absorbed girls, Soho thinkers and smirkers, women friends, Catholic grandmothers—a strange (re)union, our temporary bond being this massive cryptic 7000-year-old woman.

Intimate gestures: tying the bags on Betsy's chalk white body layer by layer, led along by whispered directions from her but gaining my own momentum as I absorb the colors and textures, the soft, firm, heavy bags laid out on the ground in front of her like offerings, like children's clothes, like flowers, these useless but nevertheless significant treasures.

Our theatre, our ritual of preparation reminded me of the decoration rituals shared by young girls, by my friends and me: brushing Veronica's long blonde hair, helping my sister into her dress before the party, quiet conversations on our common "secrets" of what is pretty or strong or burdensome about ourselves; sharing nervous anticipation, mutual support for the eventual, inevitable journey outside our female circle; feeling positive about ourselves, feeling protected, so as to be strong outside, on the stage.

I lost some of that inner tension and private interaction when I had to assume my more familiar public role of photographer as she continued the piece. Through the lens I observed the crowd, the same people who had just been watching me and therefore somehow had power over me. There was the enchanted young girl whose concentration and comfort was shattered when an egg landed nearby and soiled her dress; the greedy, arrogant boys who had no qualms about entering the space to take as many bags as possible (to be used down the street later in a fight); and the many 20-30-40 year old men and women whose interests ranged from trying to guess her gender ("no woman has a jawline like that") to staring transfixed and delighted at the apparition of a woman, white faced and laden with sixty pounds of rose- and jonquil-colored bags making a substantial, private, controlled but romantic/theatrical space for herself.

My immediate attraction to her visually is the direct reference (unconscious: Betsy has never seen them) to the beautiful "warrior vests" of certain African nations: cloth jackets heavily laden with magic tokens of leather, wood and stone, used essentially as "arrow proof" vests in war.

Hugeness, protection, ponderous weight, gentle colors, sensuous textures, tenuous construction and so temporary as the bags were slashed open, letting the colors pour out and cover the ground, leaving a soft pink trail, a circular trail of footsteps and discarded bags.

*Betsy Damon is a performer, sculptor and mother who recently moved to New York City. Over the last five years she has been a visiting artist and lecturer at many universities, involved in feminist art programs, and founded a Feminist Studio in Ithaca, New York.*

*Su Friedrich is a freelance photographer who is interested in doing projects which explore fantasy and deception.*

## they're always curious

they're always curious about what you eat as if you were some strange breed still unclassified by darwin & whether you cook every night & wouldn't it be easier for you to buy frozen dinners but i am quick to point out that my intravenous tubing has been taken out and they back up saying i could never just cook for one person but i tell them it's the same exactly the same as for two except half

but more they're curious about what you do when the urge is on & if you use a coke bottle or some psychedelic dildo or electric vibrator or just the good old finger or whole hand & do you mannippullaaattte yourself into a clit orgasm or just kind of keep digging away at yourself & if you mind it & when you have affairs doesn't it hurt when it's over & it certainly must be lonely to go back to the old finger

& they always cluck over the amount of space you require & certainly the extra bedroom seems unnecessary & i try to explain that i like to move around & that i get antsy when i have the urge so that it's nice to have an extra place to go when you're lonely & after all it seems small compensation for using the good old finger & they're surprised because they never thought of it that way & it does seem reasonable come to think of it

& they kind of probe about your future & if you have a will or why you bother to accumulate all that stuff or what you plan to do with your old age & aren't you scared about being put away somewhere or found on your bathroom floor dead after your downstairs neighbor has smelled you out but then of course you don't have the worry of who goes first though of course you know couples live longer for they have something to live for & i try to explain i live for myself even when in love but it's a hard concept to explain when you feel lonely



# THE TAPES

EDITED BY LOUISE FISHMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BETSY CROWELL

*"Women have often felt insane when cleaving to the truth of our experience. Our future depends on the sanity of each of us, and we have a profound stake, beyond the personal, in the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other."*

Adrienne Rich

*The Tapes* are the edited comments of ten lesbian visual artists who met as a group in New York City during the winter of 1977. Even though many of us had had prior experience in feminist and lesbian groups, none of us had ever before sat down to talk about our lesbianism and our art. For each of us, this new group experience was profoundly moving. Discovering after our first meeting that the experiences of the "older" lesbian artists (age 30-45 years) seemed vastly different than those of the younger artists, we found it necessary to separate into two smaller groups. *The Tapes* represent, with the exception of the "Coming Out" section, the thinking of the older group. At some time we hope the younger group, which continued to meet, will produce a similar statement.

With our goal being to share our experiences as lesbian artists, we found ourselves discussing a myriad of issues, the highlights of which are presented here. A number of surprising facts emerged. Only two of us had identified as lesbians for more than four years. As would be expected, the experience of being a lesbian in the fifties and sixties had a strong impact on our politics and attitudes. The majority of the group had not experienced the quality of oppression, repression, rage, and despair that only the fifties could inspire. Four out of six of us in the older group are mothers and the subject of motherhood became one of the most profound and painful issues to emerge. That the institution of motherhood for these women artists was a greater source of oppression than that of being identified as a lesbian and that their motherhood functioned initially as a survival mechanism were both striking revelations. A less surprising discussion included the complexity of relationships with our mothers, sources of great difficulty as well as inspiration. The section which mentions established women artists is short because of the probability of being taken to court for divulging some of our personal knowledge or sharing some well-worn secrets about those mighty ladies. The sections on anger, energy, and work should be further amplified by other lesbian artists. This is the area of *The Tapes* which I find most important to me as a painter—the information which was kept a mystery to most of us—probably to maintain certain myths about

the process of making art. Although only fragments are presented here, at least it is a beginning for the sharing of "secrets."

It was difficult for us to focus on the energizing effects of our lesbianism on our work. Obviously, this is the area which needs the most thought. Some of us sense that we have special powers and great potential to make the best art. Why is that? Coming out gave most of us a great deal of energy for our work. But what is it about being a lesbian that really affects our work directly and makes it different from other work, if it is different? What does lesbian art look like? This subject was only touched upon during our discussions. The fact that there is only a handful of us scattered here and there and even less who are exhibiting our work or who have a degree of visibility as artists and as lesbians seems to indicate the powerful male machinery and the myths which control an artist even in her studio. The anguish of working that is evidenced in this article is some indication of how much guilt we carry around with us for having done it at all. As a community, we seem to be in a comparable place to that of the feminist art community five years ago, yet with the double jeopardy of coming out as lesbians as well as artists. Our need for community is overwhelming and yet, as *The Tapes* reveal, we have ambivalence even about that. Forming a community is almost impossible when ninety percent of its potential members choose to remain in the closet. I see *The Tapes* as a nudge toward a common ground for lesbian artists. At the very least, it will provide information about how some of us live and work and what we are thinking about—examples of the fact of our existence.

Louise Fishman

## COMING OUT

*"My mother found me in bed with a woman when I was sixteen. I was scared to death. She walked over to me and said, 'You are swine' and slapped me as hard as she could. I raced out of the house and I was out in the night.... My mother never looked for me.... I disgusted myself, and yet, this relationship was my only happiness. With all the politics, that rejection is never diminished."*

"I am thirty-eight. I came out as a lesbian twenty-one years ago, in 1956. I came out publicly about five years ago, at a Women's Ad Hoc Committee meeting. There was no comment from anyone there. It was as if I'd sneezed. When I came out I also made an important commitment to being an artist. The two seemed to go

hand in hand in nourishing each other. . . . My father stopped supporting me and for the first time I was forced to start thinking about how I was going to survive."

*"I didn't watch a movie, watch a TV program, have a conversation with a man for two years. I didn't read a critical art journal, nothing. Ideally, I would have liked to have lived that experience for ten years, intensely involved with another woman."*

"I felt a speedy and incredible rush of energy for awhile. However, I think an equal amount of energy, a different kind of energy, goes into just sustaining the center of myself around being a lesbian."

*"In coming out, I felt magical for the first time in my life, and I felt I could use that magic in my painting."*

"I am twenty-three. I came out about a year ago. When I was in art school a lesbian painter came to speak. I think the response she got made me realize there was no way a woman could have her experience, her art taken seriously (let alone come out as a lesbian) in that context. I dated one of my male professors, believing it to be a sure method of getting attention for myself as an artist. . . . I've got to be a lesbian in order to be a painter because there is no other way in this world that I can make art that is my own. I feel that I do have a strong support group. Two lesbians/painters/friends live in my building. We've been to the same art school and listened to the same rhetoric. I don't want to talk like the boys do. I want my language to come directly from my work. We are having a very hard time with this (language) which may have to do with still not believing in ourselves."



*"I feel that I came out through the Women's Movement, with a certain support group around me which made it very easy; very, very, comfortable. That support group, combined with my work, was a place where I could deal with certain parts of myself, so I really confronted my lesbianism in my work and it was just a matter then of removing the hidden parts of it in my work, taking the layers away, admitting what was in the work. Once that was bared, it was obvious. I think that I found a real support group in being a lesbian. That was not a painful experience for me. But what I had not found was a support group as a lesbian artist. I am pretty fortunate. I am always hired as a visiting lesbian artist. I can be out pretty much wherever I go."*

"I came out within the past year. I think it is directly related to focusing on whether I could be a painter or not."

*"It seems very clear to me that I am different and it takes me a long time to remember that it's because I am a lesbian. . . . I feel that when I came out I went in. It's like everyone I know seems to come out. And I have been thinking lately about the people who don't. My relationships with them have been very different and not as important."*

"I am twenty-two. I came out at school last year. I know I've been a lesbian for a long time but it was a matter of being afraid to admit it to myself. But I think I was smart enough along the way to cultivate friends who were supportive and sympathetic and shared a lot of my feelings and ideas so that by the time I was ready to come out publicly I had already surrounded myself with people who would support me. . . . I am a painter and one of the things that really concerns me now is bringing together my feelings about being a lesbian and my feelings about painting, because I feel as though they have been really separate. Now I'm trying to empty out a lot of the garbage from school. The rhetoric is sort of clattering in my head. . . . One of the big problems I have in painting is that I feel that my paintings aren't mine. I have trouble doing them and I feel they don't come from me. For that reason I have a feeling I am always lying. Lying to myself and not taking myself or the work seriously."

#### MOTHERHOOD

*"I have been denied my motherhood. I am not allowed to have my children, to have a say about where my children go to school or what's to become of them. I am permitted to see them on weekends. I am not permitted to take my children for two months in the summer. . . . I was not allowed to have my children in my loft for two years because I am schizophrenic and because I went to a looney bin. And because I am considered by my society and by my husband not fit to be a mother. The children have made the bridge by coming to me and making other things possible. . . . I would not choose to have my children all year round because I want to paint. But I would choose to have them for a month or six weeks in the summer and I am not permitted that."*

"My children are some of my closest friends. I am the only person here who has made the choice to throw my lot in with the kids. I have kept peace and haven't gone



through the terrible struggles and pain which you all have. But on the other hand, I am thirty-eight years old and have no work which really moves me. It's going to take me a long time now to develop that, having made the choice I made. I have paid a big price for that choice."

*"I don't have children and my family doesn't think I'm a person because I haven't. I had an abortion. It was a choice that I'm only beginning to forgive myself for now. Before that I thought abortion was murder. But when I got pregnant I didn't care. I would rather kill than to have men in my life. I couldn't have been a painter. Everything would have been destroyed."*

"I don't feel my lesbian oppression as greatly as I have felt oppression as a mother. That isolation is just so brutal that I had to get out of it. It was killing me. I don't feel that about being a lesbian."

*"For me, having a child was the only way there could be a possible experience of direct physical love, because I could not feel any honest physical love with a male and physical love with a female was taboo. So that was my inspiration to have a child. . . . But then when I had the child I had nothing but hatred for it because it took me from the studio."*

"Having a child was the only way I knew to love myself. I loved being pregnant. I had incredible energy. I was creative. . . . I fell in love with my body. I was back in my studio very quickly. It didn't interfere with my work. I had a good marriage. But I really felt that I had to leave it. I felt that way before I came out. . . . When I came out it scared the shit out of me. At first I thought that no one liked me anymore, even my best friends. I stopped asking things of people. Then a year later I left my children. I got to the point where I found myself crying week after week after week and then I lived with them again and I think you cannot do that unless you have a lot of support. I have lost a lot of time and history is against me."

*"My major quilt paintings came out of my first pregnancy when I had the twins. I was tapping into their growth and I painted ten enormous quilts during that pregnancy."*

"There was no social understanding for a woman who became a mother to separate herself to become an artist. I think it is categorically impossible to do both. . . without help. I left a six-month-old baby. And I cried for three years."

#### OUR MOTHERS

*"I come from a family which includes two women artists, my mother and my aunt, but neither of them presented me with a real alternative to becoming a secretary, a teacher, or a housewife because of their terrible and unfulfilled struggle to make art. My mother never stopped being a housewife, never was able to totally pursue her work, although she paints much of the time and is fairly sophisticated in her knowledge of art. She is serious but never has made a mark for herself. She will never stop being primarily my father's wife. My aunt was an alcoholic, had two nervous breakdowns and*

*ended up killing herself at the age of fifty-nine, after spending thirty years studying painting, including a summer with Siqueiros and a year at the Barnes Foundation. She had fifteen or so one-woman shows and is in four major museum collections. She married a man who was a writer and an intellectual who hated her energy and her gift and spent all his waking hours beating her down. On her death bed she was worried that he would not be able to get along without her, despite the fact that he had watched her as she slowly killed herself and did nothing to help. Both of their concerns for their men overshadowed any real help they could give me.*

"My mother is totally into self-denial. She is a very creative, positive woman. . . . She is "the great woman behind the man."

*"The death of my mother-in-law woke me up to a direct vision of the content of my anger and my need for a rite of passage. . . . I perceived her death as all her woman-energy turned against her. I had the incredible feeling that I was going to die too if I didn't do something. My selves had gotten highly separated. I was feeling very unreal. . . and her death coincided with that."*

"My mother died this year. She kept worrying that I would be alone because I didn't have children. I never worried about that before. . . but those being her parting words, I was filled with worry."

*"Agnes Martin told me that she was not free to be a painter until her mother died and she told me I would be that way too. She said, 'I was on the Staten Island ferry and I heard my mother call "Agnes" and I knew that she had died and I was happy because I was free to paint*



*and I could let go of caring about her.' . . . As you know, Agnes was alone and totally accepted the joy of her own aloneness. People have different needs."*

"I remember being downstairs in my basement studio in my parent's house when I was in college. I was painting a black painting. I went upstairs to have a cup of coffee and my mother came out of her studio and said, 'I'm working on a black painting!' She thought it was wonderful because it meant we were one and the same person. That was a very frightening intrusion to me, yet there was something mystical about it."

*"As a child and as a young woman, I was constantly seeking female support—in terms of love, and especially as it related to my sense of selfness as an artist and a poet. Anytime I made a bid for female support the discussion was always that I was too sloppy, if I would only comb my hair some man would find me attractive. When I would go to a female for support, had that woman ever reached out . . . but she didn't. She gave me a whole list of what I was doing wrong and why I wasn't making it in straight society. What I needed was to straighten out and be like other women. That support was the same I got from my mother and father."*

## THE ART WORLD

"When I think of how I can relate to well-known women artists—Louise Nevelson is someone who stuck with the fight. Although she made herself into some kind of witch/sibyl. She isolated herself by the costume. Martha Graham did the same thing. You could not walk up to Louise or Martha and say, 'Hey, let's go have a cup of coffee.'"



"The New York political art world is decadent. . . . It's perverted to the point that no one in it can have a noble, honest, or true friendship. . . . I find the work of that community to be abysmally dull, boring, repetitive, incestuous, and I don't think anybody has had an idea since Duchamp."

*"Some women are a lot like Garbo cashing in on homosexual and heterosexual males. She's the muse on the pedestal. These women make themselves goddesses. Men accept them and gradually their work is also permitted. But the men define what kind of women they are going to accept and how they are going to accept them."*

"Inspiration never comes from fame. The male bureaucratic power system from which I receive my support absolutely is a star system, a bad translation of the movie system into the art world."

*"Two of our country's most famous and respected women artists have never expressed their lesbianism publicly. But it became quite clear to me that any woman who made it through to creative art had expressed lesbianism because they had expressed the totally feminine position in the universe."*

## ENERGY (A DIALOGUE)

*"I have to take naps after I make two moves back and forth to the painting. I work very intensely for those moments and I sleep for an hour to prepare myself for more work."*

"When I have my psychic energies up to do a piece, that is when my full self is its healthiest. I am having a flower. As a woman I have options that very few other people on this planet have: to bring forth flowers."

*"Energy is something I'm constantly struggling with. It's very important for me to know the place it comes from."*

"It is sparked by love, in its divinest form. It comes from being in love and catching passion. The passion can come from another person. It can come from your mind."

*"Maybe my struggle is on a more basic level—which is how to use the love that I have."*

"How to use it constructively. And not to have wrong loves. I've spent my life having wrong loves."

*"Wrong loves are in my past now. Misusing energy is what gets in my way."*

"That's my magilla. I am a libertine. I am a spendthrift with energy. I am profligate and I should be locked up. I sit on six sticks of dynamite just to sit on the dynamite. And then nothing's done. . . . I am always shorting. I collapse because before I've ever gotten to anything, I have used all the energy. I have never learned how to use the space between the fuse and the time the dynamite goes off. . . . I spend a lot of time in bed recovering from energy attacks."

*"All my life I have been punished for my energy. Did they ever call you a strong, domineering female?"*

"No. But have you ever been told by somebody that you need more rest than anyone else? That you're burning the candle at both ends? My father once told me that while I'm going I should stick a broom up my ass and sweep on my way."

## WORK

"The experience of working is a microcosm of my whole life... the way I coerce a shape into forming, the severity of my discipline... and the enormous doubting. Now I am making paintings on paper that are about a way of birthing a shape. Originally the shapes were about exterior spaces. They are starting to be more about internal spaces. I start with nothing in my head, on the paper, and with no feeling of a history of previous work. When I am in front of a painting I don't even know how to hold a pencil, I forget everything I know... as if I was starting out at three years of age... The way I suffer a form through, there are so many things I will not allow to happen... the way I won't allow them to happen in my life... This is a source of a lot of power and a lot of problems in the work. I can't accept a painting as having any meaning until it has gone through changes and changes, until many things are lost and it looks very simple and it doesn't look at all like it has gone through what it has gone through. The painting becomes separate and doesn't feel as though I had made it. I've discovered lately that the lines in my painting sometimes read as if they were 'light' and sometimes as an 'edge,' like the way light sometimes falls on a bird flying outside my window, one minute it is soaked with light, the next, the bird has moved out of the light and I can see its outline against the sky."

"I use very specific, concrete imagery whenever I am intensely exploring something. And then I abstract until I can claim my image. As I understand it better, that's how I would describe my process. My life has gone through dramatic changes and my work just diaries them. The big breakthrough was when I did a whole environment on pain... I realized then that I had finally claimed my pain. It freed me to celebrate, to do performance, to do ritual."

"What you have to do to get yourself to paint, doing one stroke and going to bed for four hours... (is) that Jungian thing of exposing the underlevels. You've made a mask and become a spirit. And so you have to do things or you won't come back... that old shaman thing... you go to heal somebody and you catch their disease and may never come back. It's like that. You go beyond. You pay psychically in going to the underlayer of the personality structure and bringing up stuff that you don't know and don't know where it's going. I never even dealt with birth nor would I want to because I tend to be a classical artist and my art is removed from my emotions. I am not an expressionist. Maybe that's what keeps me from going bananas."

"My work is very secretive. There are a lot of cubby-holes and dark spaces that one could get caught where the light doesn't come in. And the light distorts what the thing is and only gives you a hint of what that form looks like."

"The only time I am not angry is when I am painting."

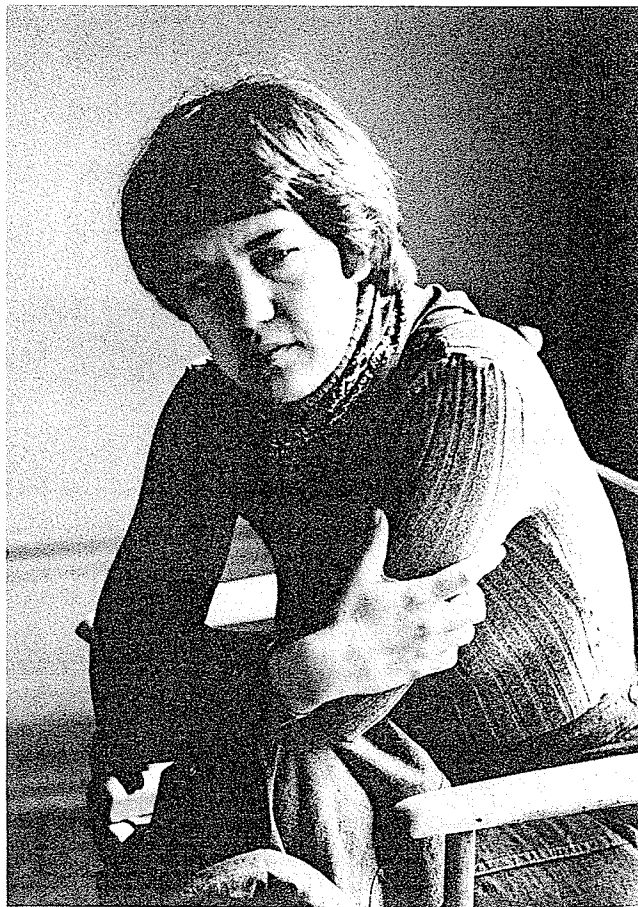
*And I don't want to destroy that by putting politics all over it. So that the one place I am totally human, the only place where I am the best possible person—which is in my art—gets fucked up with hating my father, resenting my brother, and being angry at all males and straight women."*

"When I'm getting ready for a show I'm thinking about my paintings all the time, and every time I do something connected to the show I have difficulty being sexual. I don't have a sexual feeling in my body. I feel like I'm dying. One thing I've learned in the last ten years is that if you aren't sexual with people they leave."

"After a show, I've left several parties in my honor, generally crying. I walk home and lock the door and if anybody is dumb enough to come and pound on the door and say 'Why aren't you coming to the party?', I scream 'I never want to see you again.' It doesn't generally endear me to them."

"My work process is so painful to me that I always need reassurance from other women that it's OK, that it's legitimate."

"I used to think my work was very related to a lot of things that were going on in contemporary painting and I used to think there were certain young painters who were very important. I've been thinking more and more about the fact that with few exceptions they really don't have the kind of quality I thought they had. If we're really going to do it, let's go back to the great art of the past. We set our sights too low. As lesbians we have the potential for making great art."



## ANGER

"We each carry around enormous rage. I think that the threat in my life has been that my rage would destroy me, and until very recently, that has been a real possibility. We need to focus our rage so that it becomes usable energy."

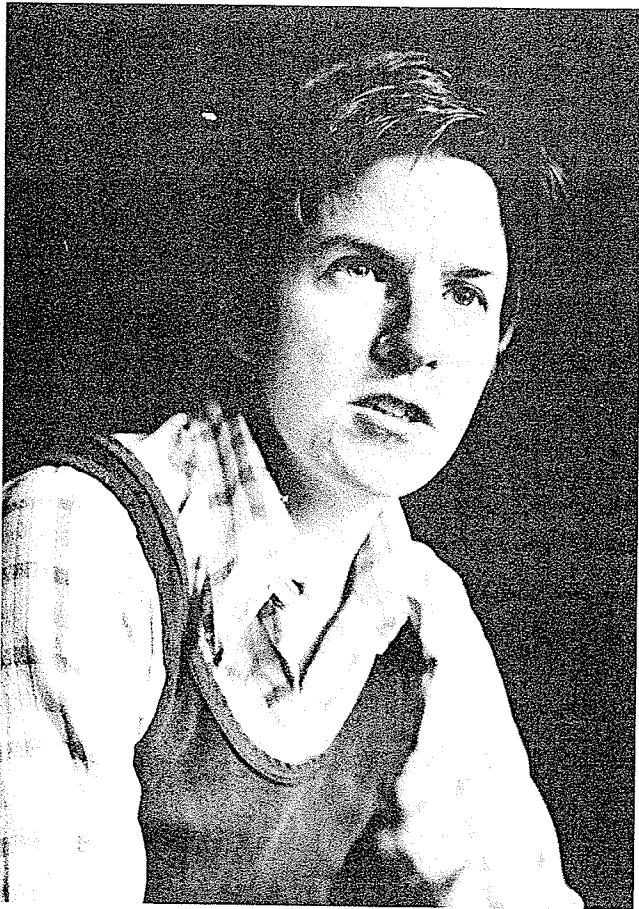
*"It has been a lesbian's role to be angry. I object to that as a pressure for my own identity."*

"There are different moral degrees of anger. There's the anger where I say I could really murder. And that's absolute, malicious sin. And I believe it's sin to my advantage. Then there is anger because I have been done in until I'm forty-five and stopped from being able to be an artist because I've had to go to bed for nine or ten months because I've been hurt. And that is an anger that I self-indulgently allow myself to be plowed under with . . . and it's a question of character strength to overcome that. And then there's an anger of 'Dammit, I'm going to do it,' which I think fuses the work and is a very healthy anger. . . in itself it can be a very useful and motivating force. . . or it can be very self-defeating and you can get in a very paranoid fixation that can destroy you."

## POSITIVE EFFECTS OF OUR LESBIANISM ON OUR WORK

*"Before the Gay Liberation Movement I felt like a maniac, not able to accept the reality of my queerness. I couldn't direct my full energy to my work."*

"(Being a lesbian) allows my womanness to be all mine. I have all that force behind my work. And that's what makes a difference. . . . The whole process of finding



myself as a woman sexually and finding my course as an artist is a simultaneous process."

*"There's that level of physical comfort, being able to relax, that's really important and it naturally affects my work."*

"It's that level of risk we encounter so much of the time . . . it allows me the ability to take more risks in my work."

*"I think it's good that men denied me a peer relationship. It made me stronger in my resolve that the art was important."*

"I've received the encouragement and the validation of my existence for things I have been vaguely, slowly moving toward all my life."

*"The more out front I become as a lesbian the more affirmation I receive from other lesbians and some straight women."*

"I've been less terrified to make changes. . . so that I am now able to go into music or dance."

*"We don't relate to men much which makes it much easier for us to make art. I can be a primitive in my own time because of the fact that I am a lesbian. That gives me a lot of energy for my work, a lot of choice. My work can become more peculiar and its peculiarity is not threatening to me."*

## COMMUNITY

"I feel very confused as to what my community is. There is no lesbian community of artists, no economic community. . . . I am certain that if it was a lesbian political gathering (instead of my show) there would have been a community. There is a power community for political events. And yet the artist is way ahead of politics in a way. The lesbian art community could never get the support which the lesbian political community can receive."

*"I was never very much accepted by the lesbian radical community. I was mystical and religious. I had had this background of being involved with men, but at the same time, I had always known Agnes Martin and written about her. . . . Then I went to work with the Byrd Hoffman School. The Byrd Hoffman School was creating art out of personal madness. It was a predominantly homosexual community. I found it personally very helpful. That community was rather like Harry Stack Sullivan's homosexual ward at Shepherd Pratt Hospital. The idea of a healing community, people healing each other. I came out in that group."*

"It's becoming clearer to me, on hearing everybody talk, that if we don't get a community together we're not going to survive. I have seen so many brilliant women—with all kinds of personal power—fail. They have killed themselves, gone mad, dissipated their energies. With all the pride of lesbians we could all still go down the drain."

*"We are a group of people who have traditionally been*

*covert, secretive, about every move we make. You can't come out on the job, you can't tell your parents, you're not sure you want to tell your kids yet. It's such a traditional pattern to be secretive that it's like a story about a bunch of prospectors who couldn't sit next to each other on the porch because they might shoot each other if somebody got too close. Secretiveness breeds a very territorial sense about protection and armament."*

"I certainly think that we have the least options in terms of funding, money, gallery space, critics. If we want to be visible there are no options. At all. God forbid that there should be a lesbian show in the Museum of Modern Art and that somebody would condescendingly write about it in *The New York Times*. The last thing they would see is the painting. I always get told by men how angry I am, how hostile I am, how domineering I am. And I'm sure I am. I think that because lesbians are the outcasts of the sexual world, much more so than male homosexuals, by being pariahs or lepers we have a sort of honesty of despair."

*"If there was more of a connection for my work, more of a lesbian art community, it might ease up some of my panic about putting my work out into a totally remote space."*

"The idea of community is slightly threatening because of the fact that it involves more commitments to other people. The more I become involved with painting, the fewer people I want around me."

*"I think that what we are looking for is intelligent, inspirational material from other human beings. And honest feedback. . . I am looking for a creative milieu in which to function."*

"What I've been hunting for is a type of community in which the life as well as the art give caliber to the spirit."

*"Community is hard because of the demons of jealousy and competitiveness."*

"Everyone here has stated that what we respect is rigor and discipline in ourselves. I would like a community that has that commitment."

*"One thing I've found out over the years of being very idealistic about collaboration is that collaboration is usually about who gets to be president. It's a very political act that I don't think is possible outside of primitive tribes where people are structured to do a dance together, for centuries, for religious purposes."*

"There is great difficulty in developing language in an historically male culture, with a male esthetic system, being taught by males that Jackson Pollock was the painter. Of course I like Fra Angelico and of course I like Giotto, and of course I am inspired by Degas. But I think our problem is to develop a valid female esthetic system, a female language with almost no precedents."

*"I feel that it is very important for women to assert being lesbians, to assert being totally feminine, because I think a female support system of sexual sympathy is very necessary in the arts."*

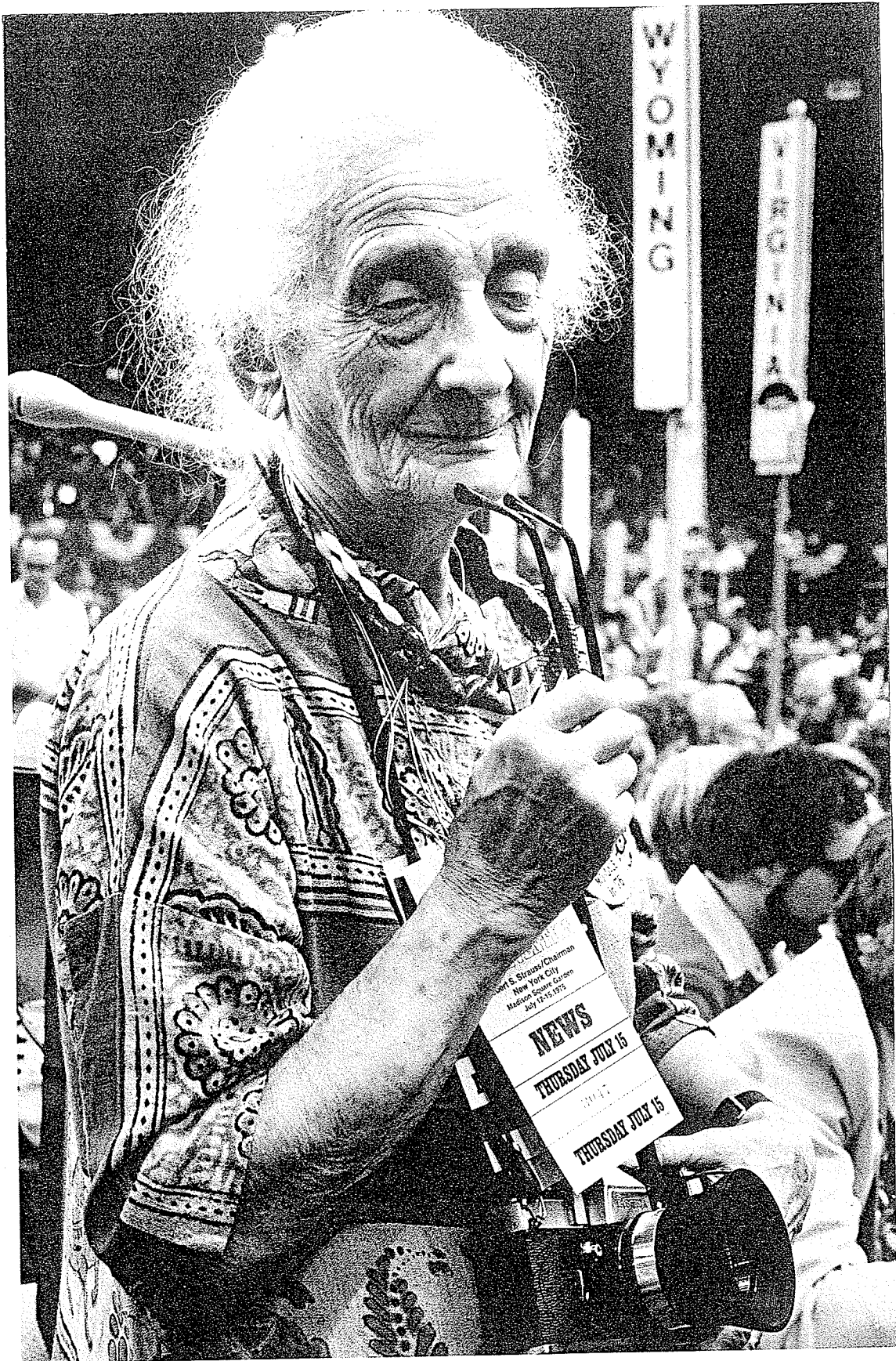
"We must develop a context for women's art, which is influenced by so much of what you are describing. We must ask questions, is there a feminist sensibility, or even a lesbian sensibility? We make art in the context of other art . . . and we need the context of other women's art to make our own art unique. The visible art is the male art; that is the art that affects us. The other art which has affected me I have sought out, such as the art of non-Western cultures or non-white art. And now, the beginning visibility of the art of other women. It is a very slow process. The more visibility the better. The more we talk about our work, the better. Out of this, something will emerge which is clearer about who we are as artists, as mothers, and as lesbians."

*Information about the participants in The Tapes:* all are white and college-educated; four of the women are mothers; two are from working-class backgrounds; three from upper-middle-class backgrounds; and six from middle-class backgrounds. All live in New York City. We range in age from twenty-one to forty-five years. Two women have identified as lesbians for about eighteen years, the rest from one to four years. One woman is in art school, six are painters, one woman is involved in ritual performance and makes sculpture, one is presently making a theater piece, and one is a photographer. Some of us work part-time jobs, a couple of us teach and collect unemployment when we can, and one of us works full-time. All of the women, except for two, are in the collective responsible for the third issue of *Heresies*. Participants for the three sessions were Betsy Crowell, Betsy Damon, Louise Fishman, Harmony Hammond, Sarah Whitworth, and Ann Wilson. Also participating in the first discussion on "Coming Out" were Rose Fichtenholtz, Amy Sillman, Christine Wade, and Kathy Webster. Betsy Crowell took photographs and assisted in transcribing and editing the final material.

\*"Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," Rich, Adrienne. *Heresies*, Vol. 1, January, 1977, p. 25.

*Louise Fishman is a painter who lives in New York City. Betsy Crowell is a freelance photographer.*





Eighty year old woman photographer from New Hampshire. n.d.



International Women's Year Conference, Mexico City, 1975.  
Dinner party at People's Republic of China Embassy.

*Bettye Lane's photographs have appeared in many publications, including WomenSports, Newsweek, Ms., The New York Times and The National Observer. "Covering the women's movement over the past eight years has raised my level of consciousness on what it means to be a woman in our society."*



# Feminist Publishing: An Antiquated Form?

Notes for a talk at the Old Wives Tales Bookstore, San Francisco, Ca.  
Feb. 27, 1977

by Charlotte Bunch

especially

I. The Q nobody wants to talk about: (even at Omaha Women in Print Conference)  
Why publish and write when nobody reads anymore?  
Or do people read anymore and if so, what?

Why is reading important? --- besides the fact that we're in the business --  
(and not to deny the value of other media forms):

1. To convey ideas/information -- especially those which aren't readily available in the male media -- feminist newspapers do this BUT other forms of media (our own radio-TV, etc.) could do that job without needing the written word.
2. To develop ind. creativity and imagination (I've been reading those studies of effects of TV as passifier, pre-programming our images, and they are frightening in their effect especially on children.) I remember the RADIO -- you had to imagine how "The Shadow" or the women on "Queen for a Day" looked -- you had to create as well as receive.
3. Individual passivity vs creativity is related to the process of rebellion of peoples. ALL Revolutionary movts make literacy a high priority-- it is seen as essential to giving people ability to think for selves, to choose alternate ways, to rebel.  
We assume our people are literate but our society is going post-literate-- what are the implications of this for making radical change?
4. Reading-written word is still the cheapest, most available form for pen and paper - all to use. Anyone can get materials to do it/and probably even mimeograph to disseminate their ideas, while vast amounts of money are needed to do film, video, etc.

These underlying questions and trends in US society are our problem:

- literacy should be a feminist issue;
  - teaching women to read, write, and think our priority;
- These are essential to long-term struggles for change.

II. What is the specific importance of feminist publishing/writing?

-If ~~words~~ - the written word is important, then its important where, why, and how to do it.

I'm not talking about IND. morality or duty of why a particular person publishes where -- that debate has polarized too easily and often denies ind. complexities--

I mean the underlying basic issue of why feminist publishing is vital to feminist writing +  
to women's power

And why it should be supported as crucial to our future.

First, I believe that the existence + visibility of feminist (and esp. lesbian-feminist) writing that we have today is largely a result of the existence of feminist presses, periodicals, journals, and books over the past 10 years.

(Even that printed by male presses would not have happened if we had not created and demonstrated the market.)

This is so not only because feminists print much of our own writing and created the market -- But also -- even more -- because the existence of feminist media has inspired and created new writing:

-new ways of thinking and working

-new topics for exploration in both fiction and non-fiction

When I say that feminist presses have created atmosphere + possibilities that inspire more and more new work--

I don't just mean most recent, most "developed" presses...  
(nor do I mean that all feminist press work is genius)

I mean that this is a process with a History: feminist publications did not spring up out of nowhere to receive writings already there. Feminist media has always been closely tied to the beginnings of women's movt. since the days of the mimeograph machine, when our struggle to define ourselves and control our lives was cranking out 500 copies of "Why Women's Liberation?"

(We believed with a religious fervor that if only we could get more copies out to more women so they knew what we knew -- then things would change.)

Those were times not only of religious fervor but also erotic energy-- even when I was "straight" in the women's liberation days of 1968-69, some of our most erotic times were spent around the mimeo machine...

Before we could admit to sexuality between women, it was there in our work together. -feminist presses have always been integral to spreading our movt.

We quickly saw that we needed more than occasional mimeoed tracts (although these still play a real role),

We saw the boys - right and left - chopping up our articles and interviews in their presses -- if they ran them at all.

So about 1970--they began: Off Our Backs; It Ain't Me Babe; Women: A Journal of Liberation; Aint I A Woman, etc.

Now there are over 200 feminist newspapers, magazines, presses and publishers and another 30-40 women's bookstores.

All of that material from mimeo to finely published books is the feminist press.

### III. The Feminist Media exists for many reasons:

- not "just because the boys won't print us" -- (today they will print us, we are popular and there are some ways to use that to our benefit)...

BUT OUR PRIORITY must always be to keep our media alive, growing, and expanding:

- 1) as a base of power made up of political and economic institutions of our own.
- 2) as a means of controlling our words and how they are disseminated, even when we aren't popular.
- 3) as a method of creating new words/new work, which has been often overlooked in debate about feminist presses, but interestingly most, so ~~and indeed~~ I will end ~~this discussion with~~ of this.

(with a ↗)

The feminist media are not passive receptacles for what's already been done-- we are active creators of new models, directions, questions for thought and action, both thru our existence and thru the work we seek out.

(Bertha <sup>Harris</sup> was to discuss this in fiction -- the difference between her experience of doing a novel for Daughters Inc. compared to her previous 2 novels with a male house was extraordinary.)

Let me take my experience in non-fiction: OOB, The Furies, Quest.

Quest: our main goal (some call it obsession) is to create new feminist theory that combines the best of political tracts and academic work.

We want to build/reflect theory and analysis based on experiences of the movt. ---  
-of writers and activists

Yet informed by research and facts -- and countering the anti-intellectual trends of the movt.

Now, obviously that's suicidal or quixotic or both --- Yet, after 3 years, we feel that something is happening in theory that is partially because of us:

- 1) We don't wait for articles to fall from the sky --  
our job is to solicit, cajole and seduce women to try to write theory...  
(we will go to any length necessary to get an article)
- 2) It isn't just publishing ... it isn't even just editing...  
it is also teaching and learning what its all about:  
-teaching activists how to write  
-teaching academics how to write in a way that more people can read  
-learning ourselves how to do it, how to recognize new forms, how to ask the right questions to see what feminist theory is and can be.

The relationship of author, editor, and publisher in feminist publishing is one of mutual creation involving debate, turmoil, growth---

But we all have a mutual desire to move forward -- we have a common stake in the content and the results;

This is hardly shared by the boys in publishing who want us for money, but not to advance feminism.

- IV. In conclusion, the feminist media isn't then an "alternative" ---  
it is our future (As June Arnold discusses the term in her article for Quest on "Feminist Presses and Feminist Politics.")

It isn't a training ground to get you into the BIG TIME publishers,  
as the "small press" is often seen.

(Oh yes, I too had my "Big Time" experience -- I published a women's liberation anthology with Bobbs-Merrill in 1970 and it disappeared; it had sold out its original 60,000 copies as a special issue of Motive Magazine, promoted through the informal grapevine of the movt. in 1969..

But it disappeared in 1970 as a male press book because they lost interest and never promoted it despite its proven audience.)

No, the feminist media isn't just a stopgap --

--it isn't just ind. choices about where to publish, which can involve various issues

--it is our future, as an institution and as the well-spring of our words and thought and action.

It is our looking back and going forward in the written word.



Alice Austen (on the fencepost) and Gertrude Tate at the auto races, May 1902. Photographer unidentified.

# Alice Austen's World

Ann Novotny

When she was a woman of forty, the photographer clambered up a high fence beside the race track, focusing her European press camera on the turn-of-the-century automobile speed trials on Staten Island. One friend who was with her raised his own camera to record the photographer—so we can see Elizabeth Alice Austen up there still, athletically balanced on her precarious perch, concentrating single-mindedly on the picture she is taking, oblivious to her observer and to the other spectators around her and not giving a tinker's damn that her ankles are exposed below her long skirt in a most unladylike manner. The lover who was to share Alice's life and her enthusiasms for over fifty years, Gertrude Amelia Tate, is smiling quizzically at the second photographer: she and he may be sharing amusement at how very characteristic this unconventional pose is for Alice.

From the time when she was very young, much about Alice Austen's lifestyle and personality was unusual, according to the social conventions of her time and place. Just before or very soon after her birth in March, 1866, her father, an Englishman named Edward Munn, deserted her mother and vanished home to London, never to be heard from again. The abandoned Mrs. Munn, with her small baby and no means of support, returned to her parents' Victorian cottage on the east shore of Staten Island. She stopped using her married surname, and her bitterness toward her former husband communicated itself to her daughter. Small playmates in the neighborhood soon discovered that one sure way to enrage the little girl known as Alice Austen was to call her "Alice Munn."

Alice's strong personality was formed in the 1860's and 1870's in her grandparents' home, where she was the only child in a household also shared by her mother, her Aunt Minnie and Minnie's husband, and her young Uncle Peter, as well as by two or three resident Irish maids. She was the center of attention for all these adults, who played games with her, humored her fits of temper, encouraged her natural abilities at sports and mechanical skills, and helped to mold the unusual young woman Alice became.

It was Aunt Minnie's husband, a Danish-born sea captain, who changed the very nature of Alice's life by bringing home a camera in 1876. As he experimented with the bulky wooden box and demonstrated it to the family in the garden, Alice watched, enchanted. Although she was only ten years old, she was patient and intelligent, and strong enough to hold the camera steadily on its tripod; her hands were naturally skillful at adjusting the simple mechanism. When the Captain

sailed away again, he gave her permission to play with it in his absence. Uncle Peter may have realized that in Alice's hands the camera was something more than a toy. During his frequent visits home, he showed his enthusiastic niece how to use chemicals to develop the negative images on the glass plates she exposed, and how to make prints from them. He and the Captain were probably the people who helped her further by installing, in an upstairs storage closet, a tiny home-built darkroom (which can still be seen today, with its deep shelves and remnants of Victorian linoleum, in the city-owned house on Staten Island).

Young Alice spent hours on end in the darkroom, developing plates and toning and fixing her prints. Because there was no running water in the house when she was young, she carried the plates and prints down to the pump in the garden, to rinse them in basins of icy cold water, winter and summer, sometimes changing the rinse water as many as twenty-five times. By the time she was eighteen years old (the earliest year from which any of her photographs survive), Alice Austen was an experienced photographer with professional standards.

It is worth emphasizing how early this was in photographic history. Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) had only just exposed his first negative by the time Alice's skill was perfected. Alice began to take photographs some twenty years before Edward Steichen (1879-1973) bought his first camera in Milwaukee and twenty years before Eugene Atget (1857-1927) began to record the streets and people of Paris.

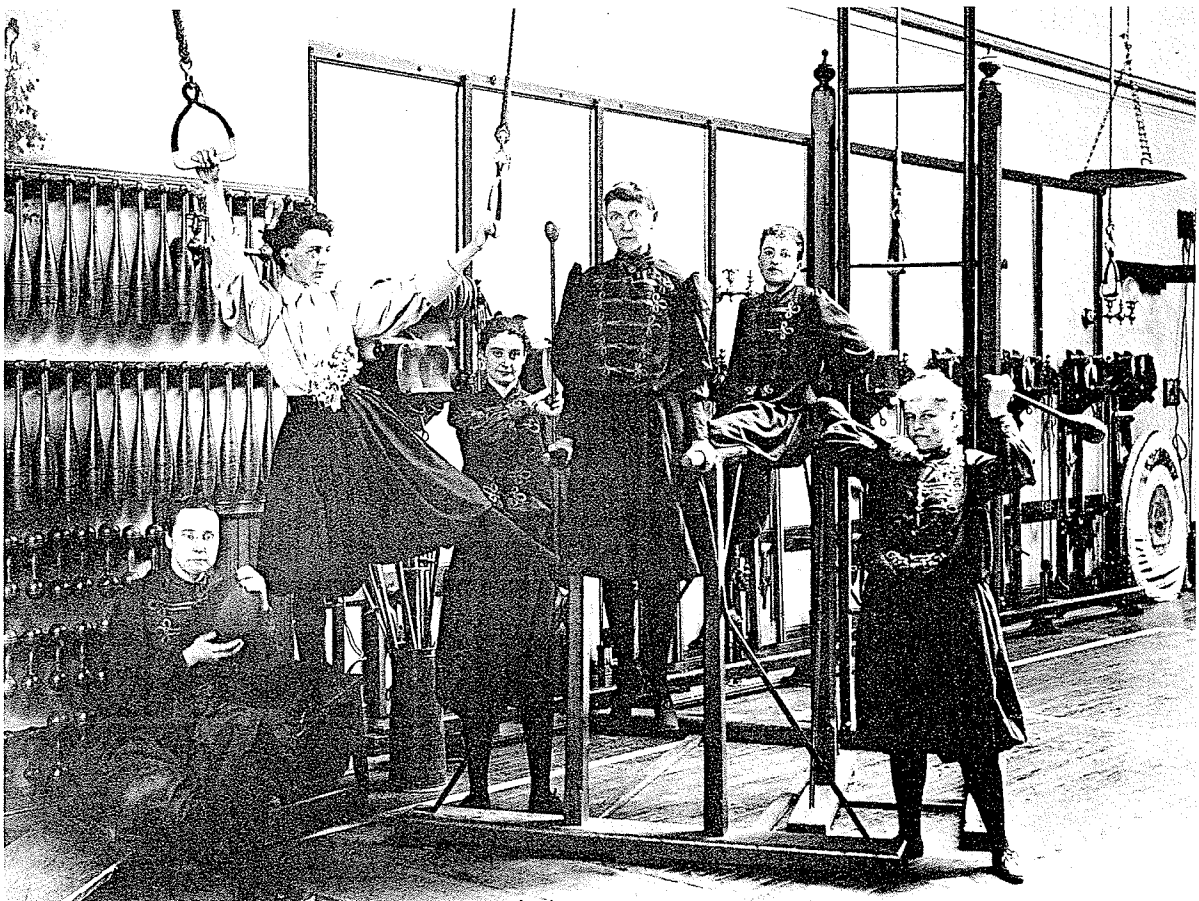
The photographer whose work most closely resembles Alice Austen's, Frances Benjamin Johnston, began working as a photojournalist in Washington, D.C., in the 1890's, when she and Alice were both in their thirties. These two women probably never met, and may not even have heard of each other, but the similarities between them are striking. Johnston never married, and it is quite likely that she too was a lesbian, although "her private life remains hidden behind a veil of Victorian manners," as one biographer has written. Like Austen, she was well-connected socially and much-traveled, unconventional in many ways according to the norms of her society, a strong and independent woman whose career also lasted into the 1930's. Johnston became known for her portraits of the famous (Susan B. Anthony, Alice Roosevelt, actresses, and the wives of the Presidential Cabinet) and of the obscure (women workers, Blacks, Indians), and above all for the realism of her documentary photographs (world expositions, Yellowstone Park, coal mines and battleships).

Austen, like Johnston, was a realistic documentary





Mrs. Cocroft did housework for Grandmother Austen while her husband was in the service. Their eleventh offspring is in christening clothes. Photo by Alice Austen, November 1886.



Daisy Elliot, on the rings, Violet Ward (holding the football at left), her sister and other amateur gymnasts perform for Alice's camera. Photo by Alice Austen, May 1893.



Twenty-two year old Alice Austen poses in her Sunday best. Photo by Captain Oswald Muller, June 1888.



photographer—something unusual around the turn of the century, when the women photographers who were her contemporaries made pictures to illustrate Tennyson's poems (Julia Margaret Cameron of England), portrayed pretty landscapes, dressed children as cherubs, posed themselves as nude dryads communing with nature (Annie Brigman of California), or, like Gertrude Käsebier of New York, tried to capture the Eternal Feminine Essence in sentimentalized studio portraits of mothers with their children. These other photographers typically used a soft, blurred focus and emphasized light and shadow in imitation of Impressionist painters, trying to prove that photographs were a form of Art by disguising the fact that they were made by mechanical means—the precise fact that Alice Austen enjoyed about her camera.

Austen lived in the real world and photographed people and places as they actually appeared. She focused her lens so sharply that every small detail of leaf or woodwork, facial expression or lettering on a sign, was recorded. She began with the subjects closest to her—her grandmother's bedroom filled with Oriental vases and Victorian bric-a-brac, the household maids, and her girl friends in the garden posing with their tennis racquets, banjos or swimming costumes.

Instead of romantic idylls of motherhood, Alice photographed the Austens' harried-looking household worker, Mrs. Cocroft, with her ten small daughters. Perhaps she let the Cocroft children arrange themselves in the branches of her sumac, because she understood that little girls seldom had a legitimate excuse for climbing a tree. Certainly she never subjected children to the awful ordeal of posing in disguise as little angels. She appreciated them as they were—inquisitive and busy, mischievous and often hard-working (as when selling newspapers on the streets of Manhattan).

The women she recorded are as real and vigorous as Alice herself. Other photographers in the 1880's and 1890's chose to portray nymph-like young women floating in unruffled ponds or dancing effortlessly on tiptoe through flower-filled fields. Austen recorded her own friends in heavy bathing suits that were calculated to impede the movements of all but the strongest swimmers, and she showed them doing gymnastic exercises to develop the strength their daily activities required.

The fact that Alice was a woman, often photographing women, adds a special dimension to her work. No masculine camera could or would have invaded the private sanctum of the young Victorian lady, preserving for us the bedrooms of Trude Eccleston, Julia Marsh, Bessie Strong and of Alice herself, showing us all their souvenirs and home-made decorations. Only a woman's camera would record the unself-conscious affection of young women for one another, and their mockery of the conventional strictures of their society. Mrs. Snively and Miss Sanford would never have kicked up their skirts to reveal knees and ankles if a man had been watching, nor would Alice and her close friends have posed as cigarette-smoking depraved women or—worse still—as dashing young men about town. Alice Austen did not waste any time pondering the essence of femininity.

The fact that she was a woman also means that it was a considerable achievement to have produced a body of work as large (perhaps 8,000 negatives made over more than fifty years) and as excellent as hers. Austen did not have to worry about money when she was young, but

she had to surmount the less tangible deterrent of Victorian social custom. The barriers to be overcome by the serious woman photographer (much more formidable a century ago than today) are described in *The Woman's Eye* by Anne Tucker: "Not only must she find the time and energy to create, and establish her right to do so, but she must know what she wants to express and how best to express it. To achieve this, any artist has to explore and take risks, but so often a woman is handicapped by her public image as a woman. . . . Exploration, whether of jungles or minds, is considered unfeminine and dangerous. . . . Beyond the realm of fashion, women are not encouraged to be original, but to look for approval." Austen received all the approval she needed from her family, from Gertrude Tate, and from her close friends. Victorian society was not strong enough to restrict her growth or to undermine her courage. She did exactly what she wanted to do.

Everywhere she went she took her photographic equipment with her, some fifty pounds of it: cameras of different sizes, a tripod, magnesium flash attachment, and glass plates as big as eight by ten inches. In a horse-drawn buggy, she carried her equipment around the unpaved roads of rural Staten Island—to the first tennis club in the nation, to winter skating parties on the Island's frozen ponds and creeks, to musicales in the Wards' house, to masquerades and to bowling parties given in the private alley of her friend Julia Marsh's mansion. Because she very seldom went out of her way to look for special photographic subjects, her pictures reveal her own way of life and her personality. Popular and extraordinarily energetic, young Alice Austen passed busy winters and happy summers in a social life that was, in her own words, "larky," full of carefree sprees and pranks.

But she took her photographic projects very seriously, even though she was not dependent upon them for her income. Time and time again, she transported her equipment on the ferry to Manhattan to document, and finally to publish in a small portfolio the people she called the "Street Types of New York"—the city's newly-landed immigrants, street sweepers, rag pickers and peddlers, the Irish postmen and policemen, the news-girls so poor that they went barefoot on the city streets, and the Russian and Polish Jewish women who sold eggs, chickens and vegetables in the open-air markets of the Lower East Side. She documented the arrival of



Standing in for Austen, a maid demonstrates the way in which prints had to be washed, in ice cold water. "Clear Comfort" had no running water for many years. Photo by Alice Austen.

these immigrants, from the 1890's until about 1910, in an exhaustive series of photographs of the federal quarantine facilities on Staten Island and on the nearby Hoffmann and Swinburn hospital islands. The earliest of these photos, undertaken as a semi-professional assignment for the U.S. Public Health Service, was exhibited in Buffalo at the Pan-American Exposition of 1901.

Alice traveled to that exposition with her camera, as she had done to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in the summer of 1893. She once took her photographic equipment along on a nine-day cruise with four friends through the canals of New Jersey and Delaware. On more conventional summer travels to the mountain resorts of upstate New York or through New England, she photographed scenic views and historic monuments, and—even when hampered by a long-skirted traveling dress—gave not a moment's thought to the obvious risk of crawling along a half-rotten log into the middle of a rapid stream in pursuit of the perfect angle.

On one such summer excursion in 1899, visiting a Catskill hotel known as "Twilight Rest," Alice met Gertrude Tate, who was recuperating there from a bad case of typhoid fever. Gertrude was twenty-eight, a kindergarten teacher and professional dancing instructor, who worked to support her younger sister and widowed mother in Brooklyn. Judging from the small personal photo album that commemorates that summer, Gertrude's spontaneous gaiety and warm humor enchanted Alice, who was then thirty-three. Alice's casual sophistication, her forceful and winning personality, and her comfortable lifestyle, opened Gertrude's eyes to a wider world than she had known before. Gertrude began regularly to visit the Austen house on Staten Island, then to spend long summer holidays in Europe with Alice. But not until 1917, when her younger sister and mother gave up their Brooklyn house, did Gertrude, overriding her family's appalled objections over her "wrong devotion" to Alice, finally move into the Austen house. She arrived just in time to keep Alice company there during her later years, for Aunt Minnie, at seventy-seven the last survivor of the family household, died the following year. Alice was then fifty-two, Gertrude in her mid-forties. They weathered the First World War with brisk fortitude—Alice driving an ambulance for the local military hospital, both of them entertaining officers from nearby Fort Wadsworth and organizing small parties in their waterfront garden to wave Red Cross flags at the returning troop ships after Armistice.

Disaster struck in 1929, when Alice lost all her capital in the stock market crash. She was sixty-three. She stopped taking photographs in the 1930's, for film was too expensive a luxury in years when she was hard pressed to pay bills for electricity, fuel oil or a telephone. She mortgaged her house, then lost it when she failed to meet mortgage payments to the bank—in spite of income raised by Gertrude's dancing classes, the piecemeal sale of the Austen family antiques, the taking in of boarders, and the small restaurant she and Gertrude ran in the house in the 1940's. The house was sold to new owners, who were not patient with two old and occasionally autocratic ladies.

In the early summer of 1945, aged seventy-nine and severely crippled by arthritis, Alice Austen was forcibly evicted from the home which her grandparents had bought more than a century before and in which she had lived for all but the first few months of her life. Her house was not the only loss, for her personal papers disappeared and some two thousand of her precious glass negatives were hauled away to Newark, New Jersey, by the junk dealer who bought the remaining contents of her house for a mere \$600. The surviving 3500 photographs were rescued by a quick-witted volunteer from the Staten Island Historical Society, who spotted them on the upper floor of the house before the dealer got there.

Alice and Gertrude moved into a small apartment in the nearby town of St. George, where Gertrude adjusted cheerfully to her new surroundings, but Alice sat in the wheelchair to which she was increasingly confined, staring with unseeing eyes at the view of New York harbor and mourning for her old home. She was ill as well as miserably unhappy. Gertrude, after giving Alice love and companionship for the more than thirty years they had lived together, was finally no longer able to give her the nursing care she needed. She went to live with her married sister in Queens, and Alice, her money entirely gone after a year in a succession of private nursing homes, was in June, 1950, admitted as a legal pauper into the hospital ward of the local poorhouse, the Staten Island Farm Colony. She was eighty-four.

But the story has a happy ending. One year later, a young editor in Manhattan set out a search for unpublished 19th-century photographs of American women. He discovered the Austen collection of 3500 photographs in the basement of the Staten Island Historical Society, and then discovered, to his horror, Miss Austen herself in a ward of forty beds in the poorhouse. Oliver Jensen, known today as one of the founders of the American Heritage Publishing Company, not only published her photos in his own book (*The Revolt of American Women*), but sold publication rights to *Life*, *Holiday* and other national magazines, raising enough money to release the photographer from the poorhouse and to establish her in a comfortable private nursing home for the last few months of her life. She was interviewed on CBS television, entertained at a party for 300 guests (including many of the old friends who appeared in her early photos), and honored with an exhibition of her work in the Richmondtown Museum. "Isn't the whole idea like a fairy tale?" exulted Gertrude Tate, who visited Alice regularly and who helped to prepare the guest lists.

Two months after the party, Alice suffered a slight stroke and developed pneumonia in one lung. She died quietly in her wheelchair, in the morning sun on the porch of the nursing home, in June 1952, aged eighty-six. "My heart is so full of sorrow at my deep sense of loss," Gertrude wrote to Oliver Jensen. "She was a rare soul, and her going leaves me bereft indeed. . . . God was good to spare me these long years when she needed me so much, so I can only thank him for answering my prayer, that I might be with her to the end."



Violet Ward on her porch with an unidentified friend. Photo by Alice Austen.



Alice Austen rests in her garden with Gertrude Tate. She had been recording the hurricane damage of September 1944 (her camera is at her right). Photo by Dr. Richard O. Cannon.

Ann Novotny is co-founder of a picture research company in New York. Her recent book, *Alice's World: The Life and Photography of An American Original, Alice Austen (1866-1952)* is available from Research Reports, 315 W. 78th St. N.Y. 10024. The Friends of Alice Austen House are raising funds to restore the photographer's old home and turn it into a small museum of her work.



# CLASS NOTES

## HARMONY HAMMOND

Class hierarchies and heterosexuality are patriarchal institutions which divide women, give some women power over others, and destroy our strength. As a lesbian feminist artist, I am interested in examining the assumptions of class and heterosexuality in art, and the role of lesbian art as a potential catalyst for social change. This article will focus on the myth of art as classless, and how this myth functions to separate us from the reality of our lives and affects the way in which we see ourselves. Specifically, I want to discuss how we as lesbian artists need to defy this myth by developing class consciousness, and incorporating it in the development of lesbian art and culture.

### THE MYTH

Fine art is a reflection of upper class interests, values, tastes, and patterns of thinking. The images found in art reflect and serve the needs of a small group of "corporate-government elite" (upper class white men) who define culture in America and elsewhere if they can profit from it. They found, fund, and run art museums, set standards of taste, and have a vested interest in creating, validating, and supporting art whose form and content justifies and furthers a patriarchal social order.<sup>1</sup> Jackie St. Joan has defined this social order as:

"...that system—intellectual, political, social, sexual, psychological—which requires in the name of human progress that one group (in the history of the world, rich, white men) controls and exploits the energies of another, and in which women are particularly despised. It includes patriarchal institutions (heterosexuality, the nuclear family, private property, etc.) which are the tools of oppression as well as the patriarchal mind-constructs which, like the capitalist mind-constructs, limit even our ability to think beyond what is."<sup>2</sup>

Rarely does fine art include images of workers, the workplace, or daily survival. Rarely does it depict the experiences of Blacks, Native Americans, women, or lesbians. When these images do appear, they seem outside the experience of those portrayed because they are romanticized or stereotyped, rather than real. For instance, lesbian sexuality is rarely portrayed in visual art and when it is, say in film, lesbians are presented in butch/femme roles, as sick, masochistic, and sadistic, and as though sexuality was the only important thing in their lives. This limited male view hardly relates to my experience as a lesbian. Nor do I feel that my identity as an artist is realistically portrayed. The artist's life is

romanticized as a chosen struggle of economic hardship necessary to produce art rather than as a product of the alienation of artists from society.

If art provides a way for us to perceive ourselves and the world around us, it seems necessary that we examine what is validated as art. An excellent example of an attempt to write social history through art was the exhibition "American Art," a collection belonging to John D. Rockefeller III, which was shown last fall at the Whitney Museum as our Bicentennial survey exhibition of American art. This collection contains one work by a woman artist, one work by a Black artist, and no work by Hispanic or Native American artists. The absence of work by women and Third World artists in this and most other collections and exhibitions, denies the experiences of most Americans. Not to see their experiences reflected in culture is to say that they don't exist. Because art both creates and reflects social realities, their absence becomes a political issue. As the artists writing in "an anti-catalogue" state: "Omission is one of the mechanisms by which fine art reinforces the values and beliefs of the powerful and suppresses the experiences of others."<sup>3</sup>

Another mechanism reinforcing upper class values is the myth of art as classless and universal. By creating the myth of universal art, those in power teach us to identify with images and the experiences these images represent, which have nothing to do with our own class position. We are told that art, and therefore the artist, is classless, and that our experiences are immaterial and should be ignored.

All classes accept this myth, for to question it would be to reveal the oppressive political structures and social institutions underlying patriarchal capitalist society. Rita Mae Brown writes that "America is a country reluctant to recognize class differences. The American myth crystallized is: This is the land of equal opportunity; work hard, stay in line, you'll get ahead. (Getting ahead always means money.)"<sup>4</sup> Identification with this myth of classlessness redirects us from dealing with our own particular oppression as working class, as women, as lesbians, etc. The artists in "an anti-catalogue" state:

"The mystification of art depends upon two things—upon our surrendering our capacity to judge and upon unquestioning acceptance of authority in place of the printed word and the authority of scholarly titles and distinctions. The mystification of art takes our passivity for granted. It encourages us to look upon art as if art had no bearing on experience."<sup>5</sup>

Accepting the myth is accepting our invisibility and powerlessness. To question cultural attitudes is to question social conditions. Passivity smooths the pain of powerlessness and helps us to survive these conditions. We need to see that behavioral patterns affect who becomes an artist, what artists create, what art is validated as "quality," and how art in turn reinforces those patterns.

#### HOW I BOUGHT THE MYTH

Thinking back to junior high school in the fifties, I see that one reason I chose to be an artist was to escape the daily pain of lower middle class life in Hometown—of living in a duplex, taking a bus to school, and wearing hand-me-downs until I got a job at Lerner's and could buy my own clothes. The guy I went with turned me on to Mulligan, Coleman, Getz, and all that jazz and the beat writers Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Prevert. They were "artists" and intellectuals, without money (like me), and romanticized. I thumbed my nose and fantasized riding naked down the highway. We fucked. I got a scholarship to the Saturday School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I wanted to be a dress designer or fashion illustrator because it sounded "classy" and "sophisticated." If all else failed, I could be an art teacher.

In the museum I saw "real" painting and sculpture. I remember sitting in front of the Pollock, the Rothko, and the Still, thinking that I could do those paintings, but not realizing that I was a woman and that it didn't matter what I did. In the studios I saw art being made by grubby students and I took note that the artist could wear anything, say anything, and didn't have to socialize. The artist seemed special and not bound by class behavior. I would be an artist. Accepting fine art meant renouncing my class background and stepping out of the lower middle class life of Hometown into the universal world of the muses. Safe and protected at last. Who ever heard of a middle class muse?

#### THE MYTH SHATTERED: CLASS IS HOW YOU SEE THE WORLD. ART IS HOW YOU SEE THE WORLD.

It has taken me a long time to begin to understand and accept my lower middle class background, and to realize that the art world I entered wasn't an alternative to middle class society but that women, Blacks, and the poor are also oppressed within the alternate "world of culture." As long as society allowed me to be a "starving artist" I did not question my own experiences, or how

they affected my work and work attitudes. Acting out a romanticized art life was my option to upward mobility.

Heterosexual women get their privilege from the same patriarchal systems that give privilege to middle and upper class women. Coming out as a lesbian with a feminist consciousness forced me to realize what class privilege I did and did not have, and what I would now lose. Even the fact that I first came out to myself through my art and not in bed is in itself a reflection of my class position. As a feminist artist I had learned to use my work as a place to confront fears and other feelings privately in my studio. A woman working as a maid, a waitress, or a seamstress, does not have this option.

As a lesbian, however, I was forced to confront and give up illusions I had about being accepted and rewarded by the male art world where they treated art "seriously." To be public about being a lesbian means that your work may not be taken seriously, or may be squeezed into a category of "camp" or "erotic art." Because you do not hang out with the right men or the right women (those who hang out with the men) at the right bars, and since the lesbian feminist community doesn't yet support its visual artists, you are less likely to make your work visible, to have professional dialogue, and to support yourself through your work either directly (sales) or indirectly (teaching). For women, the economic class system is largely determined by their relationship to men. The higher up the man she relates to, the more she benefits from the system. The lesbian, by not relating to men does not benefit economically and has no privilege unless she is independently wealthy. Most of us do not have that kind of support and opportunity, and without support, it is very difficult to continue making art. Historically, known lesbian visual artists (Rosa Bonheur, Romaine Brooks, etc.) were wealthy. Only they had the privilege to continue making art despite their public lesbian lifestyle.

If we examine the relationship of lesbians to the class system, and to patriarchy, we can get an idea of the active role art can play in developing a culture that does not make women powerless and invisible. In "Lesbians and The Class Position of Women," Margaret Small writes:

... At this point in history, the primary role that lesbians have to play in the development of revolutionary consciousness is ideological. Because lesbians are objectively outside of heterosexual reality, they have potential for

developing an alternative ideology not limited by heterosexuality. Lesbians stand in a different relationship to (the) three conditions that determine the class position of women (production, reproduction, sexuality). The lesbian does not have a domestic base that is defined by the production of new labor power and maintenance of her husband's labor power. Her relationship is in proletarian terms. The element of slave consciousness integral to heterosexuality is missing.<sup>6</sup>

I am interested in how we can do this through art. Developing a class consciousness does not mean that each work of art by a woman would have to directly relate to women of all classes, but rather that the form and content of the work, be it figurative or abstract, would somehow illuminate experience in such a way that it is shared with and includes rather than excludes women from different backgrounds. Instead of presenting one universal experience that is supposed to represent ALL of us yet represents few, art should reflect and give information—facts, emotional response, visual accounting, ways of seeing into and understanding different experiences and feelings. We must acknowledge our differences in order to learn about, support, and work with each other. Thus I feel that to make art as a lesbian with class consciousness has far-reaching creative and political potential for connecting women through work. This means actively rejecting cultural dictates, taking responsibility for our work, and questioning the concept of apolitical art. Art-making is where consciousness is formed.

#### ANALYSIS—REINTEGRATION

Ultimately it is a question of the function of art beyond the personal. It is not merely a matter of doing work that doesn't oppress others, but also of doing work that pushes further towards a redefinition and transformation of culture. For me, coming out as a lesbian has a lot to do with developing a class consciousness, and that consciousness brought to my art raises questions of imagery, permanence, scale, ways of working, and concepts of art education. It raises questions of money and power, who sees my work, and what effect I want it to have on others.

This does not mean that we as class conscious lesbian artists must make paintings with recognizable figurative imagery, that we must be downwardly mobile, give up making art for "real political struggle," or involve ourselves in the rhetorical circles of the artistic left. What it does mean is not making or accepting class assumptions about art such as what is allowable as art, who makes it, who sees it, and what its function is to be. By removing esthetic hierarchies and the need to pretend that we all share the same experiences, meaning can become accessible and available.

Talk about "bringing art to the people" only reinforces class distinctions. Class consciousness can be reflected through our art by demystifying and deprivatizing the creative process. Presently it is difficult for a working class woman who likes to write, paint, or dance even to consider being a professional artist. When making art as well as owning art ceases to be a privilege, and the art-making process itself is available to women of different classes, races, and geographic backgrounds, we can begin to understand the political potential of creative expression.

As lesbians, we need our experience validated cul-

turally. To refuse art that denies our existence and to deny that art is apolitical and universal, is to actively challenge the wealthy few and their supporters who have been defining and controlling social order through the manipulation of fine art. Demanding group and self identity in art is one means of resisting oppression. The art-making process is a tool for making these demands and changes.

Art is essentially work. Simone Weil writes that art is a surplus commodity in this culture because it does not have immediate consumption and is not shared and used by the people. That artists are not part of the paid work force further separates the productive from the consumptive classes. The work process (and the purpose of work) have always been external to the worker. Just as she writes that our main task is to discover how it is possible for the work to be free and to integrate it, we must free the art-making process so it is accessible and understandable to everyone. The process should be as available as the product.<sup>7</sup>

Acknowledging the existence of class structures, and how through art they can affect cultural attitudes is just a beginning—a necessary step one. In the long run, we should not focus merely on the relationship of one class to another, or on the relationship of art and class, but on defining a future classless society. The integration of art into the lives of all people and not just the upper class contributes to that vision. "Revolution presupposes not simply an economic and political transformation but also a technical and cultural one."<sup>8</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. The Catalogue Committee of Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, *an anti-catalogue*, 1977. The catalogue was written as a protest to the Whitney exhibition, "American Art, 1976." I have included a condensed version of a more detailed discussion of "how art is mystified, how art exhibitions influence our views of history, and how collectors such as John D. Rockefeller III benefit from cultural philanthropy."
2. "A Lesbian Feminist: Jackie St. Joan," an interview, in *Big Mama Rag*, Jan-Feb, 1977, Vol. 5, no. 1.
3. *an anti-catalogue*
4. Brown, Rita Mae, "The Last Straw," *Class and Feminism: A Collection of Essays From The Furies*, edited by Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron, Diana Press, 1974.
5. *an anti-catalogue*.
6. Small, Margaret, "Lesbians and the Class Position of Women," *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement*, edited by Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch, Diana Press, 1975.
7. Weil, Simone, *First and Last Notebooks*, translated by Richard Rees, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, p. 58-61.
8. *First and Last Notebooks*.

*Harmony Hammond is a painter and sometimes writer who is a member of the Heresies collective. She teaches at any university and feminist art program that will have her, and gives workshops and lectures on lesbian artists and feminist artists.*



*Yoland Skeet. Nancy—P.S. 160. 1975*

*Yoland Skeet is a filmmaker and photographer.*

# LESBIANARTISTS

We are a collective of lesbian artists working on a lesbian issue of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics*. We are soliciting material of all kinds, but in particular we are asking for responses to this question:

What does being a lesbian artist mean to you? (Your work, your medium, your relationships to other artists, to the Art World, to the Lesbian community, etc.)

You can approach the question verbally and/or visually, in any way that seems most applicable to you. In the issue we will print the question along with the replies. If you have any specific feelings, pro or con, about signing your name, please include them in your response.

Our copy deadline is April 15. Please send all material to: *HERESIES*, Box 766, Canal Street Station, New York, N.Y. 10013. C/O 3rd Issue.

We will be selecting the material for the issue and contacting you in the spring. If YOU consider yourself to be a lesbian artist, please respond. And thank you.

# LESBIANARTISTS

Lesbian energy is the subject of my art.

I weave useful objects, bags, ponchos, saddle blankets, and more. These objects are strong and durable, for I weave them with active lesbians in mind as customers. I want to make the best for lesbians. It is this attitude which makes my work "lesbian art."

In the physical realm, there is little to set my work apart from another's weaving; it could be copied exactly. But my feelings and thoughts, as I work, also become part of my product, just as surely as the design and color and threads themselves. This non-physical aspect is like the lint between the fibers, inseparable from the final product and, hopefully, seen and felt by the viewer, user, and/or wearer. It is the part which cannot be copied.

Obviously, this is a hard proposition to prove, but I know from experience that it is true. Because I, as a lesbian-separatist, am thinking strong, positive feelings about lesbians and lesbianism as I work, lesbians are drawn to my work. One told me she physically felt warm glows pass through her body when she put on a poncho; some have told me they feel strong with it. One woman referred to stripes in the shoulders of a poncho as "power stripes."

Also, as a lesbian-separatist, I sometimes am thinking

negative thoughts and feelings about men and some straight women as I work, and, consequently, they often do not even notice my display. There is no magnetic energy to attract them. Not only are they not attracted, but sometimes they feel repelled by my work. This pleases me, because I feel very strongly that I only want to sell to lesbians, and this way I don't have to make any special effort to accomplish it.

My partner is a jeweler, and she has noticed the same phenomenon. Many lesbians have told her that they draw strength and self-esteem from her work, not only from the lesbian symbol rings and pendants, but also from stone rings that are not specifically "lesbian." It is the love for herself as a lesbian, and her concern for all lesbians, which they are absorbing.

Any subject, then, may be lesbian art, and lesbian subjects may not be lesbian art. What makes the difference, in my mind, is the thought and feeling about lesbians which the maker feels *as she works*, the tangible energy which becomes part of the product and is communicated to the consumer.

Jane Stedman  
Aitkin, Minnesota



Lesbianartist.

I wish I had a lesbianartist button.

A small black and white button with six-point Optima letters.

Intimate. Women would have to read it up close.

A button for a high-energy day.

Clearly the word makes me happy.

It didn't always.

I spent a lot of time not believing there was a connection between my sexuality and the art I made, not believing my two carefully separated adult identities had been closely bound together even in childhood and, certainly not believing the content of my painting was emotional.

Joining together two powerful words made me recognize the focus of my life and put me in touch with my own work.

If I hadn't been a lesbian I wouldn't be an artist.

From girlhood I had admired strong women, loving their intelligence and strength.

I focused on what was woman-identified, experiencing a passion, not yet genital, not yet verbalized, that made me want to find an identity in work, in expression, in making paintings.

In making art, I hadn't before realized how closely

related the content was to the impulse that made me want to be an artist in the first place.

When I was eight years old I had a game.

I would go out into a grove of trees away from the other children and would take pieces of bark and sticks.

I would draw on them with nail polish and lipstick and crayons, writing secret things about admiration for women, about a crush on a woman.

While making these I was very intent; but then I would get very frightened.

The slightest sound of anyone approaching would make me hide them under leaves, bury them in the ground.

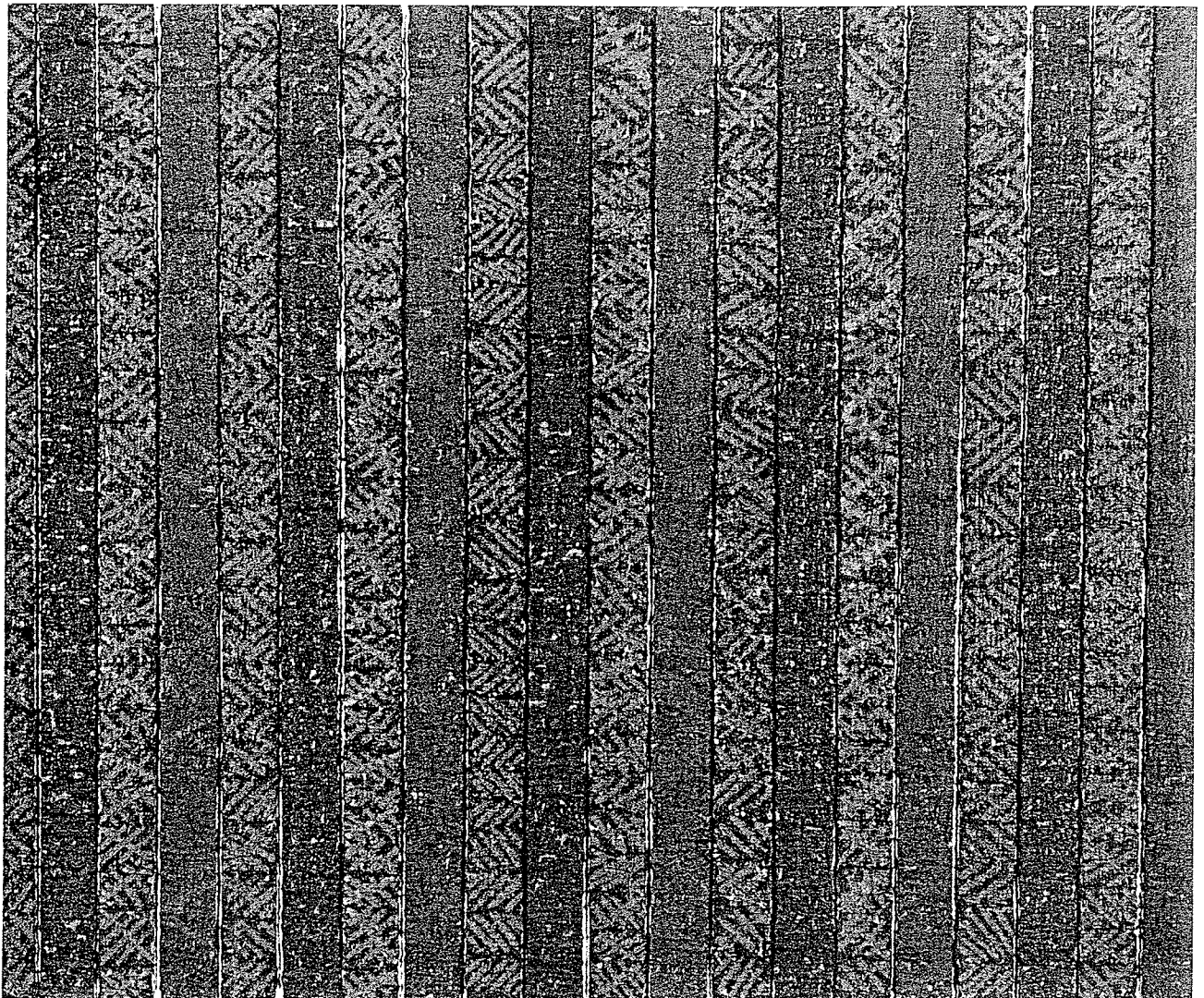
In my work now I use wood and paint.

I make marks that spell out secrets, burying them under layers and layers of glossy color.

The secrets, repeated dozens of times, asserted and recognized, then protected and hidden so well—sometimes I don't see them myself.

It's been a long time since I was eight years old, but the secrets, the pain and happiness of loving women were then and still are the motivation and content of my work.

Maryann King  
New York City



Maryann King. *Gaslight*. 1977. Acrylic on wood. 38" x 45".

These are the questions I am asking:

*What has your relationship been to asking questions?  
Did you ask questions in school, at home? Why were you asking?*

*How do you feel about asking questions now?*

*How do you feel when young people ask you questions?*

*Are there particular people you have difficulty hearing information from or situations in which it is hard to hear information?*

*How does it feel when people give you information you already have or about something you already know about? Is it important to you that people know that you know things?*

*Do you remember the first time you had a new thought or idea, one that was totally your own? Was there ever a conscious awareness of such a thing?*

*Have you ever had the feeling that you were the first one to find or discover something, the first one to make particular connections? Does that have anything to do with art-making for you?*

*When did you realize you could and do affect the world? Was there a time of realizing your power?*

*Do you remember the first time you did a public "political" act?*

*What is your relationship to beauty and beautiful things?*

*When did you realize or decide you were an artist? Which did you do?*

*How do you feel about the idea of art being a luxury?*

*Do you ever do unimportant things?*

*What did your parents do when you were growing up?*

*What was your family's attitudes towards art?*

*What was your relationship to conformity or being different when you were growing up?*

*What were you like in high school? How are you different? How are you different than you thought you'd be when you were in high school?*

Some thoughts and answers:

Did you know that I am not really an actual artist? When I was in first grade I found out that I could not draw and I knew it then. I don't remember the exact moment of realization.

I remember that for a long time, as a little girl, my fantasy was that I would marry a struggling artist and definitely never be one. I have been feeling a connection between deciding to be a lesbian and taking control of that fantasy and throwing it out the window for good. If I am never going to marry someone, or have a man be the "core of my existence," that fantasy can never become true. The struggling part of the fantasy is certainly out of my upper middle class background, where I idealized and romanticized struggling, and it is also part of the artist myth. Chronologically I decided to become an artist before I decided to become a lesbian, but they are and were part of the same process; of saying that my life is important, of valuing my life and my self as a woman, of beginning to let go of living for others and seeing myself in the eyes of others and also giving up that deeply ingrained and conditioned woman's sense that only when I am giving, am I worthwhile, do I deserve to live etc.

At the time that I decided that I wasn't an artist, I really decided it. I knew then that creativity and all that went with it was not part of me or my life. There was a stopping of the expression of my self, of the creating

from inside of me, saying who I was and what the world was to me.

I remember when I was pretty young, in Sunday school, doing a drawing of the Tower of Babel, which was hung up with other drawings and my teacher said that I was a good artist. She said it on my Sunday school report card. That is the only memory I have of being appreciated for "art work." The next thing I remember is being in first grade and having our teacher put on music and we were supposed to draw to the music with our eyes closed. Everyone else in the class drew abstract drawings, apparently to the feeling and rhythm of the music. I drew a house, a tree and a walk. I did not get a star for my drawing and I think I was—I must have been—very embarrassed. I remember in third grade all of us making towels where we stitched threads into the towels and I was the only one who did not make a geometric design. I did some seagulls and an ocean with a boat on it.

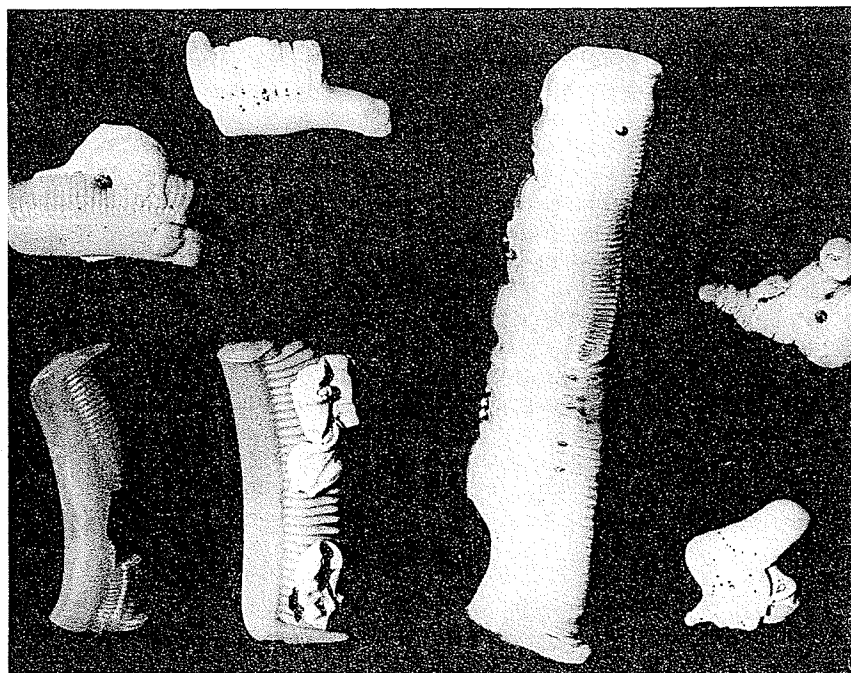
I knew that an artist was the one thing I would never be! There was something about my absolute non-identification with the creativity or activity of "artist" which had significance beyond the fact that I wasn't calling myself an artist.

I am seeing that being a lesbian means valuing my perceptions, as well as other women's perceptions and seeing that the world is a place I (we) have a right to be in charge of. I realize my outsideness and with that knowledge I begin to learn and then create beyond the given reality, and live beyond it.

There is a kind of question that is thought-provoking and "interesting" that I feel very involved in thinking about and asking. It has to do with some awarenesses that I have come to through being alive, particularly in the past few years. These questions stay with me and I love them and they feel like my "art." They are the results of awakening parts of me that have been shut down, not allowed to grow. I catch a glimmer of the me that really exists, fully alive, spontaneous, responsible, creative, awake and aware and active and unafraid. The feeling of a "first time" or a "new discovery" has to do with breaking through from that old space of hurt and shut down to the way I can be, the way every person can be, all the time.

There is something very important to me about saying that I am a lesbian, that I am a feminist, that I am an artist, that I am a Jew, that I am a woman, that I am from an upper middle class family, that I am white, etc. It has to do with owning parts of me, with feeling them, with being public, with all of me out, not ashamed of anything that I am. In that way it feels very active to say I am.

Ellen Ledley  
Pasadena, California



AMERICAN BEAUTIES

PRESENTING

AMERICAN BEAUTIES

COMBS

MASS MADE

PLASTIC INDUSTRIAL

SHARP EDGED

WIDE TOOTH MONSTERS THAT RAKE MY HEAD

TAKE THEM ALL AWAY

MELT THEM

COVER THEM WITH DIAMONDS

MAKE THEM THE LITTLE SHINING BEAUTIES

Sandra DeSando. *American Beauties*. n.d. Broken and melted plastic combs, rhinestones, plastic forks and slidemounts. 2" or 3" pieces.

Being and growing up lesbian always put me out of sync with my peers. I never did understand certain phenomena of our times. Do you remember screaming at your first Elvis Presley movie? Mine was *Love Me Tender*. I saw a whole generation of women screaming at the images and evocations of male sexual provocation. I sat in the audience wondering what it was that these women were feeling. I didn't feel like screaming. I thought it was strange the way my friends were behaving, but always I felt the undercurrent that I was the one that was wrong.

We have been brought up to respond to certain culturally defined stimulations. I didn't respond. I went through school unaffected by the captain of the football, basketball, soccer, wrestling, and chess teams. Without these things there was little else. My friendships with women were steady but painful, when one by one they had their first crush with the new boy in town. They moved, talked and pleased one huge romantic ideal—falling in love and marriage. Sex was already there; their tease and their rape. Living in rural Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey, didn't provide any alternative lifestyle, not in the fifties.

When I came out as a lesbian it was wonderful. A whole life began to take shape. Coming out was a joyous time. Suddenly ice blood dissolved, walls became windows and doors. But making a new lifestyle is a slow and steady process. It took years to wear away at the circles of isolation, fear and repression. I wanted the knowledge I felt had been hidden from me. The gay and women's movements provided support and information. With a growing perspective, doing my art work became really important and possible. Now there is so much I feel I want to do. Part of that is I want to leave records. Growing into womanhood I am finding my ancestors and making herstory. Our contact creates fibers and pathways for others.

Sandra DeSando  
New York City

In the deepest sense of the word, I see lesbian humor as the essence of the playful spirit, but play in the most challenging-to-the-cosmos sense. We play with our imagination, with our sexual freedoms, with our clothes—costuming not to represent power parodies like leather, but to laugh at the confines of color and texture, lines—and in our playing we create new worlds because of the deepest sense of the deadliness of this one. *Les Guerilleres* is playing at its most powerful, creation of language, names, structures, with joyous energy and warrior strength. I know this sounds philosophical, and yet even when I was an old femme I knew there was an amazon world—not by reading or talking but by the strength and adventure I felt in entering the bars, walking the street late at night, stepping out of bounds even if it was to find a closeness that was defined by who did what. The important thing was we did, and we laughed in the faces of the Mafia men. Our play with language seems to come from the same impulse—to turn around the givens, to reinforce each other's daring and strength in playing above this world. I think our humor, like many other parts of our culture, is celebration—the cheering on of each other to make a new universe in the presence of each other, to drop the sticks of this world at each other's feet and pick up the pieces all mixed up and in so doing assert our ability to create new worlds. I think our writers have mostly known this: they played with sentence structure and threw their words up into the air, their air, to make them fall into a different way of symbolizing a different life. I think we play because this world is not ours, and we are self-cherishing enough to know we must live somewhere. We are connected to each other enough to believe we have the power to create new worlds at this very moment with the words we play with.

Joan Nestle  
New York City

Lesbian is who I am; feminist is how I think. Feminism gave me vision, self-love, and love for other women, not the other way around. I know women who love women and are not lesbians. I know lesbians who are haters of self and other women (no surprise: men hate us and fuck us). Nevertheless, for me coming out as a lesbian was continuous with my development as a feminist. I can't talk about myself as "lesbian artist" apart from "feminist artist"; nor do I want to.

The year I came out was the year in which I began writing again, after a nine year silence. I now understand that breakthrough partly as an explosion through fear—fear that inside me was a self, a vision, that would either horrify men or bore them. My friend Paula King says, "Being a lesbian meant I could create what I wanted." Yes. It meant I stopped caring about male boredom, shock, or disgust. It meant—and means—that women are at the center of my eye, that I think of women's ears when I write, that my work grows through the tug and shove of female response to it.

But it was not just coming out which allowed me to write. It was also the conscious creation/discovery of a tradition of female art, a sense of connection with other creators, past and present, a connection which provides support, validation of one's technique and subject matter, and a source for imagery, ideas, and forms. This is a circulatory system which makes me know we are one body; the network is literally vital.

A friend tells me she read Lessing's *Golden Notebook* in the early sixties and found it "boring," i.e., threatening; the air of that time clogged her ears with self-hate. When I read the same book in 1970, I was electrified. From my journal, 1970, after reading the *GN*: "With Anna pouring jug after jug of warm water over her stale-smelling menstruating cunt, you'd think she'd tell us what kind of birth control she uses. Does she never worry about being pregnant?" Never mind the body-hating words I chose in 1970. Lessing's matter-of-fact treatment of menstruation instantly upped my expectations so that I was annoyed by her omission of another facet of my bodily experience. Prior to the *GN*, prior to the feminist movement, it had never occurred to me to miss myself in all those books I plowed through. We are seeing in this last decade a gathering of demands on artists to tell the truth about female experience. We write in a context of an audience which requires responsible work from its artists, an audience responsive in turn to our subject matter and technique.

I want to tell the truth as best I can, to recycle the energy I have gotten from women's creative work, to get that energy back in the form of more and more women articulating their experience. We all have stories and they should be told—mine among them. Thus we come to understand our experience through naming it. Thus we nourish each other, feed our visionary selves—the selves who know change is possible. My medium is words. It is what I know. I feel its limits. I would rather make movies. I would rather take over TV. I would most rather overthrow the government. But words are what I can use.

Much of my writing falls into the category "lesbian art" because I am a lesbian; the content is my experience, much of it common to all women. Fear of rape, job discrimination, survival anxiety, female solidarity, the whole societal weight of sexism, some struggles with men, participation in raising two boy children, watch-

ing them start to swagger, wondering how to love them as they turn into little piggies. My past is heterosexual, different from that of lesbians who have always been aware of their love for women, who were never touched or wounded deeply by men. I want to explore, and want other lesbians to explore, these differences among us. Gay chauvinism: I have practiced it, been victimized by it. Now I see it as only destructive, as one more hierarchy (how long have you been out? I came out in the crib....).

Since I began writing as a lesbian, much of my past remains unwritten: what has happened to women, how my life was formed, how it served men, how it did not serve me, how it was made to seem inevitable. What transpired in my marriage bed, for example, was predictable, anything but natural. It had as little to do with love or pleasure or sexuality as the grocery list. It had more to do with the grocery list.

Also important in my past: familial relationships among women, my grandmothers, mother, aunts. I need to see these more clearly, with less anger, less fear of being trapped as they were trapped, with more love. I have not yet written about the deep bond between myself and my sister, a positive model for the relationships I build with women.

I assume the telling of my specifically lesbian experiences is useful since I find myself so hungry for details of other lesbians' relationships. We all need practice in seeing what is happening and in telling the truth. In how to love each other better than we were taught. How it is hard to face a formless, unfolding future. We used to chant these words like a litany, double axes gleaming in our eyes. Now I am more aware of difficulties alongside the palpable joy. I want to be honest about these difficulties.

Yet I find myself hopeful. If sexuality is one of the earliest deepest emotional constructs to be institutionalized in our tiny child-bodies, and if at age twenty-six I could discover a range of sexual feelings—a whole capacity previously invisible—I can only conclude that all change is possible, and that we don't yet know a fraction of our capabilities. So I feel great optimism about personal transformation within severe limits. I feel less optimistic just at present about breaking through the limits, i.e., transforming the world. I feel despair/comfort when I think how my opportunity for growth is stifled by patriarchy/capitalism—despair because I will never get to be my fullest possible self; comfort because I can at least understand the reasons for my blocks, fears, tightness. I see danger in demanding that we live the revolution before the revolution. The relationship between consciousness, action, and material reality is crucial. I have been working on some notes—still formless—about competitive feelings among women; not competition for men, but feelings of envy and threat among lovers and friends. I see these feelings partly as a realistic response to a world whose goods need not be scarce, but are (jobs, publishers, even love and respect): partly as an archaic response to an old and perilous lesson about competition. I have felt much guilt about my feelings of competitiveness, a guilt which keeps me from *feeling* them, thus from working through them. I want to write about the masking feelings—feelings we feel instead of feeling something else: guilt; embarrassment; boredom; laziness; even desire. I want to rename my feelings more accurately, to disrupt the

categories within which I learned to know myself. To recognize the weight of the past so I can more readily put down what is burdensome, hug what is useful. To acknowledge my luck in living through a time when the feminist movement is making my life joyful and my work possible; to acknowledge my dependence on our movement's continued *movement*.

Finally, I want to learn not to say what comes easiest, since for me "easy" often means "old." This last comes from my experience of being challenged by my lover, another poet, about the ending of a poem: "Do you really feel as helpless as that?" she asked, and I had to confess that I didn't, and I rewrote the poem. Here is the rewritten poem. It is the most logical conclusion.

Melanie Kaye  
Portland, Oregon

### LIVING WITH CHAOS

1.

This morning the *NY Times* said  
the airforce is building new bombers.  
On points like this  
the *Times* is to be trusted.

2.

Tomatoes rot in the garden,  
your children play tag on the roof.  
I picture small bodies tripping, plummeting,  
squashing tomatoes to a fine red ooze,  
bones poking through flesh.  
I tell them to stop, they laugh.  
Helplessness swells in me like a bomb:  
they will stop when they're ready.

This is not my house but I want to clean it.  
I want to sponge down the table, pick up dustcrumbs,  
put the tomatoes up in jars.  
I want to wrap the children in blankets,  
feed them soup.  
I want to scrub the air transparent,  
take away the bombs, wash the children,  
put us to bed.  
Helplessness rises in me like bread,  
bread to feed no one.

3.

This morning I went looking for patterns,  
could find no order, no repetition.  
Then realized, this was the pattern:  
everything from scratch.

If things would hold still long enough to be named,  
we could have more lucid conversations,  
before a fire, over good wine.  
Instead we make do with the pale whistle of hunger, fear,  
the quick rush of desire.

4.

You say you don't hate yourself,  
don't feel guilty for the bombers, the hunger,  
the smog thickening the air.

"But," you say, "I feel helpless, can't  
breathe. I feel competent  
only to describe my sensations."

5.

then describe your sensations  
where else can we begin?

in the thick broth of chaos  
all possibilities swim

if the wind blows through us  
if we lack words for its sweet howling  
our teeth still know its name

your hand tracing my bones  
discovers patterns which already  
split into new forms

these bones will make soup

6.

Let me remember  
we were born new in blood

Let me observe  
how we grow larger than any predictions

When you describe the world as you see it  
let me accept your gift, match it

Let me believe  
nothing will be lost except separate skins

Let me absorb:  
there will be no salvation

only the small firm pulse of a friend  
drumming

Let me celebrate  
how we split and shed layer after layer of dried cracked skin

and hang the pieces as history  
too small for us



I am writing as a lesbian feminist artist in the Minnesota Arts Community. This is difficult because there are few substantial conversations about the personal and political implications of lesbian art here, and those few conversations that do exist result from an atmosphere of paranoia.

There are two specific instances of the art world in the Twin Cities politically using the label "lesbian" to exert community control over women's groups. The first was the termination after one year of the Women's Arts Core Program at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul. The program instilled great fear and was discussed and described by those not participating as a lesbian program that used harmful brainwashing techniques. As a result the students in the program were questioned about lesbianism and in certain instances verbally pressured to give information concerning the number of lesbians in the program, who they were, and who they were sleeping with.

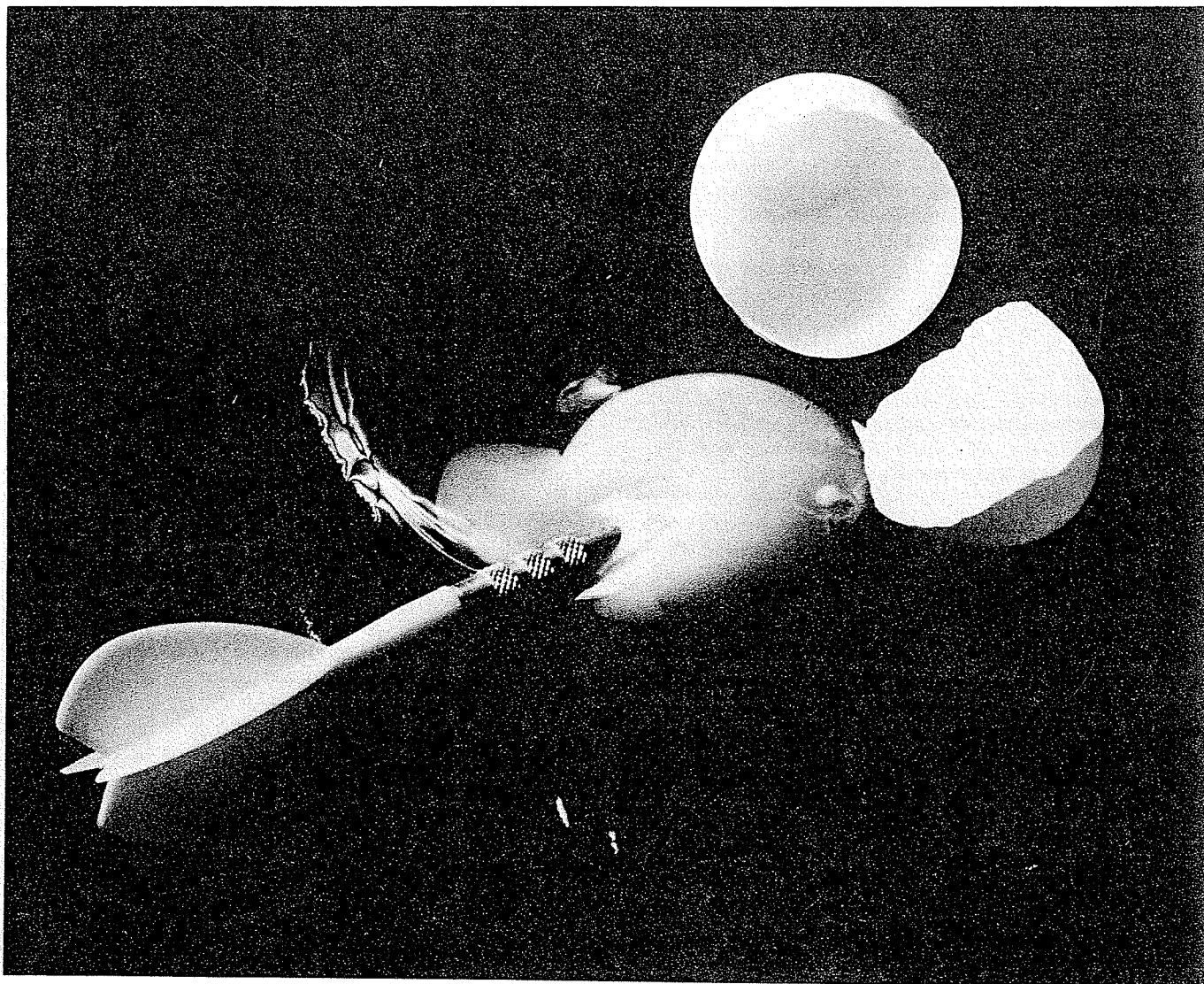
The women in the program were asked to submit reports on their area of academic study, fill out program evaluations, and participate in hour long tape-recorded individual interviews. All of these demands were met and the participating women themselves felt the program was highly successful. However, the paranoia, hostility and inherent homophobia induced a full facul-

ty meeting to vote for a moratorium until further studies could be completed. That was five months ago.

The political use of the lesbian label to attack feminists and their art worked once and it may work again. Similar tactics of divide and conquer are being aimed at the W.A.R.M. Gallery, a women's co-operative art gallery in Minneapolis. Because it is a women's gallery with an all-woman membership and exhibition policy, the community has labeled it as a lesbian organization, although in reality the gallery includes and shows both straight and gay women. Sexual preference has not been a criterion. However, outside homophobia is manipulating internal homophobia, by using "lesbian" as a negative and dangerous image. Gallery members have been told that people are afraid to come into the gallery because they would be confronted by radical lesbians and that W.A.R.M. has a dyke image.

In reaction to this some of the women in the gallery feel compelled to exhibit male artists and have submitted exhibition proposals which read like this:

"Invitational for Men—Each gallery member would choose one male artist who they feel has been supportive of women to be included in the show. I feel this would be good P.R. for the gallery in the arts community and a good way to get publicity as well as being an encouragement for men to be supportive of



Janice Helleloid. *Egg and Dart*. n.d. photograph.

the women's movement, etc. People like [name withheld] deserve a thank you from us all."

"Let's invite a man to have a show."

Women feel comfortable in dealing with the lesbian issue without the protective environment of an all-woman organization but remain concerned about the external public image. In their attempt to dispel the lesbian image, they want to integrate men in some way. The assumption is that male reads "heterosexual" and female reads "lesbian." This situation allows the established community structure to have a foothold on the internal workings of the feminist structure with women spending the majority of their time and energy taking care of the general community (men) rather than themselves and their work. Of course this is one purpose of patriarchal politics.

If the above mentioned questions were changed from dispelling the lesbian image to dispelling the discriminatory practices that are associated with the label "lesbian," then the community would need to be directly confronted and held accountable for its own discriminatory practices whether based on sexual preference or bias toward all-woman structures.

The politics surrounding homophobia is reminiscent of McCarthyism or the power which is generated from the manipulation of fear. Consciously/unconsciously choosing to be manipulated by internalized fear makes every individual a vulnerable target. Taking a passive or non-confronting posture allows the existing homophobic structure to remain intact. Political maneuvers of this kind have separated gay and straight women, working class and middle class women, and white and Third World women. It has driven wedges into the power base of woman-developed structures, separated us from our goals, and dispersed our creative energy.

Janice Helleloid  
Minneapolis

I found that the only real support that I got in Stockholm came not from the official women's movement, "Group 8," but from the lesbian women of the "Victoria-group." The reason for this is that the straight women's movement is too worried about gaining approval from the male left and is too afraid to be associated with lesbian feminism and so is not capable of developing a true women's culture—which is what I am into.

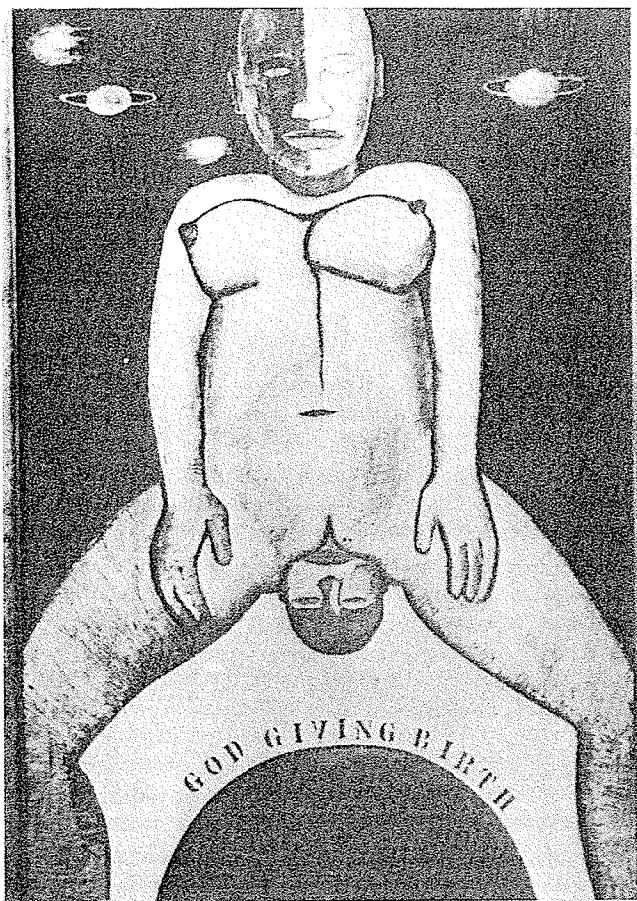
A real women's culture can only be developed by women together, women who have withdrawn their sexual, creative, and emotional power from men. Women who ultimately seek male approval, because they are sexually dependent on men, will never ultimately be able to draw any real consequences of their own actions, feelings, and thoughts. They will always be somehow looking sideways. So the real outrageous and unafraid statements have come from lesbian women. [I am very aware when I say this that at this point in time a great deal of women's "sexual dependence" on men is simply based on economics (women's poverty and fear of losing their children), and that the majority of women have no choice in the matter of whether or not to live with a man.]

When I slowly managed to produce true (to myself)

paintings of women, they seemed perfectly obvious and at the same time had a look about them of something not being quite right to many who saw them for the first time. So unused are we (women & men) to seeing women portrayed with strength by a woman. My paintings were accused of being "ugly," meaning the women are not pleasing to men.

It is when you as an artist portray women with love and pride—and not just complain about women's situation and repressed lives—that the abuse is thrown at you. Male critics, who actually call themselves left-wing and radical, have said about my work that "they feel alienated from my view on women and my views on sisterhood and motherhood." I am accused of being a mystic. Some of my paintings are based on what I have understood of matriarchal societies—where the religion was centered around the Great Mother and women were the main producers, the first farmers, and owned the land. One of my paintings shows symbolically the universal creative power as a woman giving birth in space ("God Giving Birth"). But that is only one of my paintings; others are of women working, struggling, relating to each other. According to the Swedish critics I should keep only to the kitchen sink or talk about my pain at being born a woman in a man's world. Apparently you shouldn't presume as a woman that you should or could make any flights into thoughts about creative energy, religious beliefs, the cosmos, or women's identity in relation to herself and other women.

Monica Sjoo  
Bristol, England



Monica Sjoo. *God Giving Birth*. 1968. 4' x 6'.

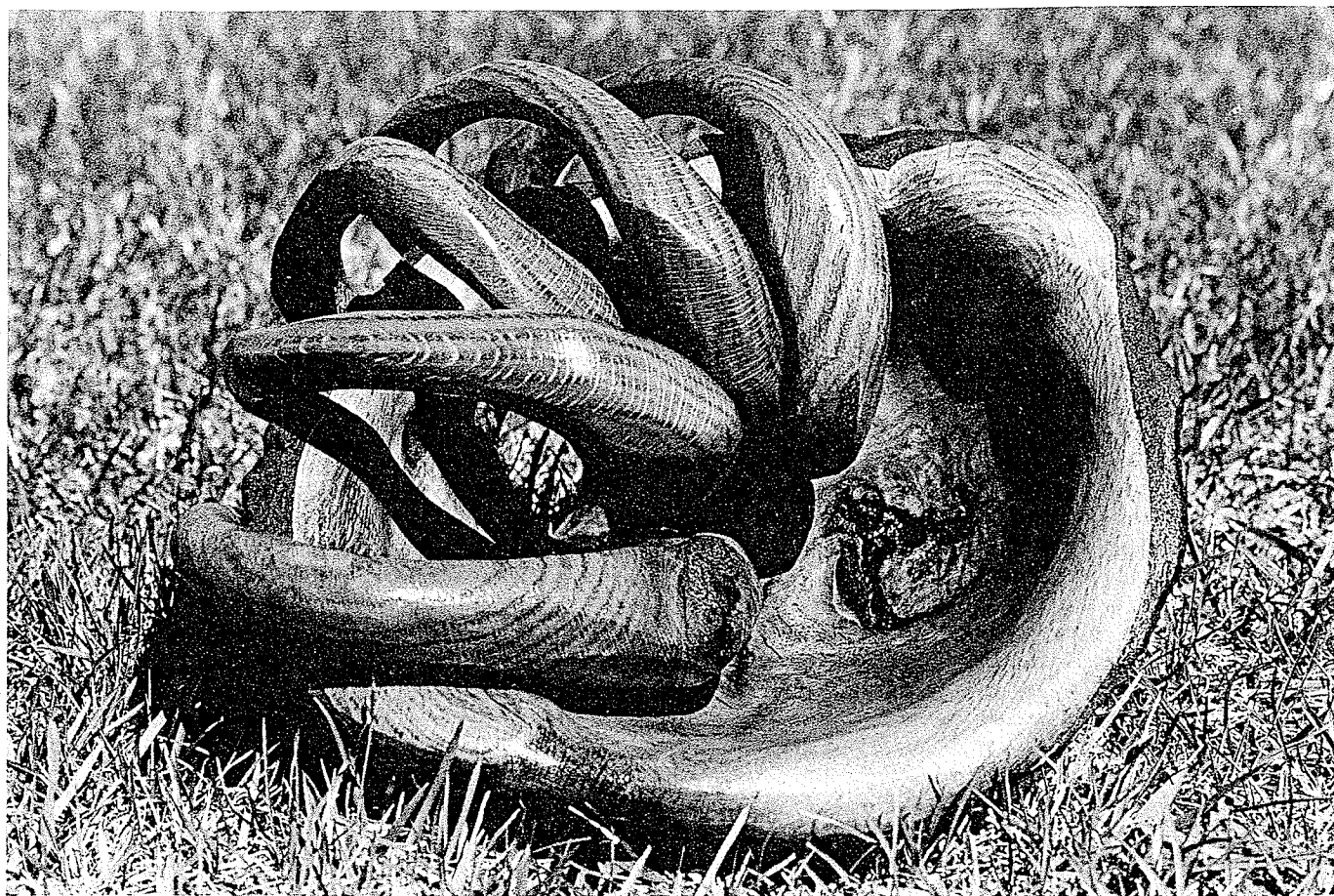
For some time I have recognized that my sculpture reflects aspects of my personal experience. Nevertheless I had not been able to effectively distinguish the personal lesbian content of the work from the broader female imagery. Recently, however, I realized I had been interpreting the work in terms of female anatomy and genitalia, but not in terms of how I experience those forms. The unity, strength and openness, the materials and the arrangement of forms that I see in my work closely connect with the expansion of self into nature which I feel during orgasmic contact with a woman. The biological parts of my work are common to all women; the sexual experience, as a whole, is lesbian. I would like to share two of my sculpted images which express the spiritual/sexual nature of that experience.

"Omphale" is a large, open bowl that is a visual expression of the orgasmic experience. The vessel has always been a symbol of change, from simple cooking conversion to alchemical transformation. The activity of "Omphale" creates feelings of change from moving into, through, and out into the landscape. To indicate the transformation the image is carved from "fungal" elm wood striated with earth-like patterns of decay. The dilated protuberances curving around the bowl are felt sequentially in the act of swelling. The swollen forms actually radiate out into the landscape while the wide spout of the bowl tips toward the earth.

The biological forms in "Autoerotic Bowl" are simply five fingers poised at the vaginal opening. The bowl knot which still retains the natural rough bark is made of oak. From the exterior body of the bowl's surface the fingers curve inwardly around the lip. The movement from the erotic act itself to the natural landscape is obvious: the bottomless bowl opens into the earth.

Embodied in the work is a sense of the personal, historic and mythic. My readings on mythologies and ancient cultures clearly have expanded my understanding of my imagery. I am intrigued by the resemblance of "Autoerotic Bowl" to the basic structure of the rhyton, which was a ceremonial vessel with holes in both ends, used in Minoan culture. It is significant that the libation liquid to effect change had to pass through the vessel/female symbol and then onto object or earth. With some sculpted pieces I make direct connections to the past by naming them after women in history. "Omphale" was the name of a Lydian Amazon queen. Moreover, in Greek the word "omphalos" means the center, middle or more beautifully that part of the rose where the seed forms are created. As in early civilizations and current primitive cultures, I feel that sculpted images should be used in ceremony.

Debbie Jones  
Ithaca, New York



Debbie Jones. *Autoerotic Bowl*, 1976. Oak. 8" x 12" x 12".

The above paragraphs were excerpted from a longer article dedicated to all women in celebration of change and especially to Carolyn Straughan, Sandy Rubaii and Barbara Adams.

"Lesbian writers can't be taken seriously. They're limited. Narrow, kinky, twisted. Incapable of universality. Lesbian writing is not, certainly, for the mass market, for decent people's homes. Let them have their little presses, their little distributorship and galleries. They make up a special interest group, like your bird watchers, your genealogists." So the male-identified critics say.

My great-grandfather refused to allow my great-grandmother to buy paper, for fear she would "waste" her time writing. Confined to do stitchery, she embroidered lines of her poetry on the inner hems of her daughter's dresses. She was a lesbian writer, though she would not have called herself either lesbian or writer.

We lesbian writers are formidable, threatening, to the breastless controllers of power and money. They, too, are formidable. This struggle informs and enriches our art, and will not lie silent, will not be locked away. Lesbian writers have married men and kept house and borne children and cooked and cleaned their lives away, scribbling in journals, writing letters to each other, shaping poems they kept hidden under mattresses or in sewing baskets. Lesbian writers have painted plates, arranged flowers, decorated birthday cakes and committed suicide. I know my kind, how it has been for us, and how long.

As a lesbian writer, I report how it has been, what our options were, and what we chose. I tell our stories, the grimness and the love. I tell breast, hair, blood, the undulant curve and the clitoral vibration. I tell the touch and the womantalk which flows between us. I am speaking quietly, as calmly as I once spoke in recipes, of the power of the mother-will and of revolution.

I have learned, in my confinement, skills which serve me well. I write as steadily as I once ironed men's shirts, write as vigilantly as I watched over my toddlers and listened for their coughs in the night. I write as only women can, as only women have: with interruptions, and with love and without cease. My images are female, my symbols are female, my energy is female. Lesbian.

Kathryn Kendall  
New Orleans

All the dangers of being a woman under patriarchy intensify as my visibility in the dominant culture increases, especially since it increases by more than one count: as writer, feminist, lesbian, foreigner. Some of the dangers: trivialization, stereotyping (since much of my work is sensual and lyric I dread the possibility of being dubbed "erotic" and being limited to that label), isolation through the star-systems and image-making, verbal and physical harassment, assault, threats. And co-optation. Of all these the fear of co-optation, of losing touch with myself, my sisters, what is necessary and real for us, this fear has never left me since I received the Yale [Younger Poets] Award.

Then again, visibility makes possible much greater contact with women. What enabled me to begin writing with authenticity was my decision, in 1973, to speak only to a female and feminist audience. It gave me a sense of community, a sense of connection and responsibility, a necessity beyond the personal pleasure of writing. It gave me stamina and sustained me. I no longer had to explain so I began to sing. This is a gift women have given me, a gift I want to share with as

many as possible. And so I am grateful for the award, the visibility, which widens the circles of women I can get to know.

Visibility also gives me permission to speak in public, or gives me certain kinds of authority, such as judging competitions. I'm still trying to come to terms with this, since I fear that it is through this door that co-optation most easily enters, but right now feel that if I can maintain my connection and responsibility to my women's community I can use these occasions to say or demonstrate things that the patriarchy would rather keep unmentioned.

On the most immediate level, in my work, I am trying to write poems that are free of the institutionalized conflicts and brutality that have characterized our literary tradition for so long, to use simple grammar and syntax, and to praise, praise.

Olga Broumas  
Eugene, Oregon

Before talking about what it means to me to be a lesbian artist, I want to emphasize two other distinguishing things about myself: (1) I am a West Coast person, having lived in San Francisco for the last fifteen years (though I grew up in the Midwest). We live differently out here from people on the East Coast or in the middle of the country. We are in a different relation to our lives, our bodies, our work and "careers." (2) I am not attached to any academic institution, nor have I ever been since I was a student.

The term artist is hard for me to use, given its connotations of privilege, elitism and irresponsibility. The mystique surrounding that term is damaging to us as women, I think, and as makers of things. Maybe I'll just call myself a writer, for the purposes of this discussion.

Now: being a lesbian writer. I think of myself as an outlaw. I operate outside the heterosexist establishment, and my effort is to subvert it so that some more humane system can be established. Women are primary to me.

Having worked for a year in New York as a guest editor at *Mademoiselle* and having for years followed with passionate interest the goings-on in the so-called literary world, I think I know what it's about. (I speak of the world of the *New York Review of Books* and its little brothers.) And the conclusion I have come to is that this world subsists on and purveys a very high level of bullshit which is, at worst, destructive to women, and at best, a waste of time for us.

I feel myself to be part of a world of print created by the independent women's newspapers, journals and publishers such as the Women's Press Collective, Daughters, Inc., Diana Press, etc. All of us together are creating something new, in that we are bringing into literature a consciousness that has never been expressed before.

The task for me is to get to what I know and then express it in the clearest way possible (I do not mean to say that one function precedes the other; they are at best simultaneous.). When I say that I want my writing to be accessible to everyone, I do not mean that I wish to write conventional novels in the style of the nineteenth century, which is still the formula for pulp fiction. But I am concerned with content, as I think all genuine feminist writers are. We want to examine the experience of women and articulate the hard questions posed by the struggle of the last few years. And for me,



prose is not performance, but ideally a clear glass through which the reader enters the story. The medium should disappear.

Part of the revolutionary content of our work, I believe, is the re-experiencing of our bodies. Having been brought up in a repressed and ignorant condition for the purposes of capitalism and heterosexism, our resistance to knowledge of our bodies is extreme. We are traumatized, we freeze, we become blind and deaf in the presence of flesh. A book that confronts us with flesh is Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*. And because we resist so strongly, Wittig has to proceed in a violent manner. She has to take us by the back of the head and shove our face into it to make us look at the body, touch, smell, taste it from the inside, make us stare at it rotten and putrid and every possible way it can be—so that we will come to know and accept and love our own flesh.

Part of what I love about dykes is our toughness. And that toughness can be connected up with a deep awareness of women too; lesbians are mothers and lesbians are daughters, so we have the whole range of women's experience and the other dimension too, which is the unique viewpoint of the dyke. This extra dimension puts us a step outside of so-called normal life and lets us see how gruesomely abnormal it is, lets us see the kinds of illusions that people live by, that steal people's lives from them. It puts us up against the moment, against the reality of creating our own lives and relationships because there are few models. But this examining and inventing reaches out beyond our individual lives and relationships into a way of viewing what goes on around us, and can issue in a world-view that is distinct in history and uniquely liberating. It is our continued working together over time, taking risks, remaining true to ourselves and stretching ourselves out beyond our limits, that will lead us to the development of this world-view.

What I want to do in my own work is to affirm women's strength, and I don't mean by that to pretend to a kind of strength that isn't real. (For instance, I find heroines like Wonder Woman or Super Dyke offensive.) In the novel I've been writing, the character who started out at the most disadvantage, supposedly, was one of the women who was very aware of her own anguish, who experienced herself in pain and out of joint with other people and the world. Over time, she is the character who developed the most strength. The other women in the book, who initially were more appealing, did not grow as much. It surprised me during the writing of the book, to see this woman, the most ineffectual and hurting one, develop into the most complete and effectual human being there. I didn't intend for this to happen; she just grew naturally within the events and feelings and interactions of the novel. And looking back, I think her depth came from her being so connected to, so aware of, her pain. So when I present images of women's strength, I want that to come out of a true understanding of the difficulties of our lives and the agonies one has to endure in the midst of our struggles and victories. To tell the truth is not easy. I hope I have the wisdom and courage and skill to do it.

Sandy Boucher  
San Francisco

In my personal life the power of the combination lesbian/feminist/artist is tremendous. By personal life I mean the life I lead in my studio, where I take measurements of myself and begin to invent hypotheses and possibilities based on these measurements. One way in which the power of lesbian/feminist/artist has manifested itself is in the terror that I uncover through painting. Sometimes I need a couple of hours to "recover" after a painting. I can feel very tangibly as though with a painting my head has split open and something has been birthed from that chasm. The terror is (again, tangibly) the feeling that my head needs to close up before I can interact with the world directly, lest something unwanted and terrible from the world get in through that split. I always have this feeling after painting something that comes from my gut, something that, no matter how indecipherable to anyone, has come from an automatic gesture from within me. I can recognize it as such.

Two things I have learned from lesbian-feminism are that: a) irrational terrors are possibly not irrational at all but part of a terrorizing way of life that goes on for all women, and b) the terror often increases for women who take steps away from compliance with the system.

Terror of rape, terror of being molested, of being tortured, of being taken over, of intrusion. I link all these together for myself and for other feminist lesbians. They are real. We're not irrational. Even the protective gestures that I make in my studio to avoid the very possibility of intrusion are linked to my fear of coming apart, being *taken* apart.

Amy Sillman  
New York City

Because of my saturation in sociology, I believe that all theories should be put to the test of research. In my opinion, the question of a common denominator existing between women artists, other than gender, is still on the drafting table, is still a theory unproven. Without defining it, it is dangerously refutable. Without defining women's art, it is impossible to secondly reach conclusions about lesbian art. As long as there remains essentially no data, as long as art remains what the individual concedes it to be, general terms such as lesbian art will always be uncomfortable terms lesbians believe to be true without knowing how to define what they mean. In other words, "I know I'm a lesbian artist but I don't know what that means." Sure, I could come up with something, but I believe a political statement merits more research than what I, or several other lesbians, could individually come up with.

As far as the Sweaty Palms show [in Chicago], where four of us advertised our work as being produced by four lesbian artists, I can only speak retrospectively and for myself. The show proved that one can not stereotype lesbians and the art they produce; one could not find any similarities even between the four of us. It also made myself, and probably others, start thinking about what lesbian art could be. I feel that in some respects Sweaty Palms posed a question. That question is still unanswered.

Phylane Norman  
Chicago



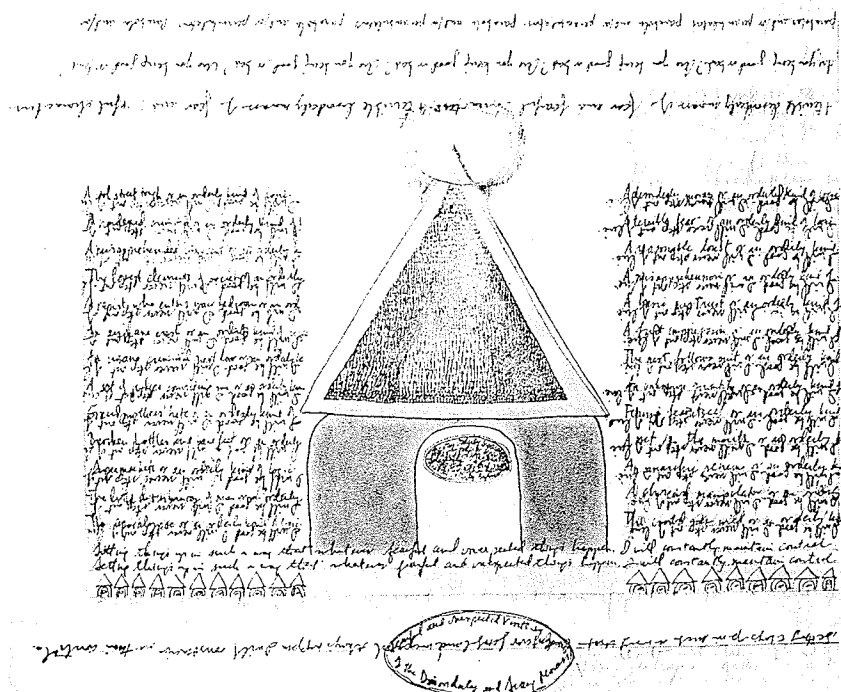
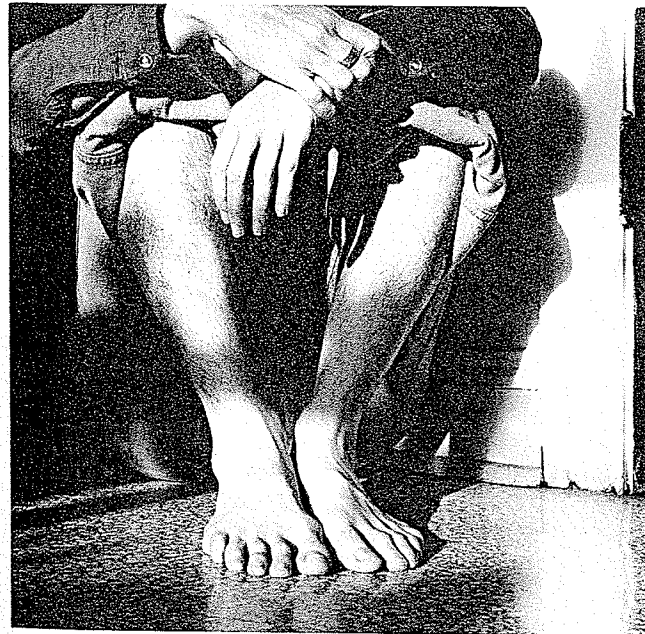


Photo by eeva-inkeri

Amy Sillman. *Marty's Cool Blue House*. 1977. Pencil, pen, chalk. 21" x 15".



Phylane Norman.

Jane Stedman, a self-taught weaver who makes elegantly simple and functional weavings, works with her partner, M'Lou Brubaker, a silversmith (formerly "Sistersilver") in their craft business, Mother Oaks Crafts.

Maryann King lives in New York City, paints, swims and puts together jigsaw puzzles.

Ellen Ledley lives in Pasadena in the Red Moon Collective and she is a member of a women's carpentry/handicrafts collective. She is also part of a group of women artists who have been meeting and talking about work.

Joan Nestle is a lecturer in English, SEEK Program, Queens College, CUNY and a co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York.

Sandra DeSando lives in New York City. She has exhibited at various galleries, including Albright-Knox and Hundred Acres. Her work is currently at the Seventeenth St. Gallery.

Melanie Kaye is a poet and activist. She teaches women's studies at Portland State University in Oregon and is a co-author of *Naming: Poems by Eight Women*.

Janice Helleloid is a member of the Women's Art Registry of Minnesota Gallery, a Woman's Collective Art Space, and an instructor at the College of Art and Design in Minneapolis. Currently she is working on an exhibition for Galleria D'Arte Del Cavallino in Venice, Italy for fall of 1977.

Monica Sjoos is a Swedish feminist artist and writer (self taught) who has lived in England for the last 15 years. Her book, *The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All* will be published by Womanspirit, in the United States in the coming year.

Debbie Jones is a sculptor, woodworker and lecturer living in Ithaca, New York.

Kathryn Kendall survives and writes in New Orleans, mothering Seth and prevailing, despite the odds.

Olga Broumas' poetry appears on page 57.

Sandy Boucher is the author of a book of short stories, *Assaults & Rituals*, and a novel, *Charlotte Street*, to be published by Daughter's, Inc. this year.

Amy Sillman would like to make a living running an offset press.

Phylane Norman considers herself a lesbian artist more often than not when she is around other artists who aren't. Photography and academia keep her occupied.



Gertrude Stein. 1920. Photographer unknown.



Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. 1928. Photographer unknown.

Photographs courtesy of Robert A. Wilson.

## Untitled

I have not been there many times.  
On two separate occasions I entered the surroundings  
Though many times I thought I was at that place.  
There were the children, amorous, and I  
who could have been their mother,  
Lovesick with them.

Though restless and seeking many places,  
we observe more than the bird does, with more longings.  
Though I too have a home,  
I find comfort in denying it.  
There are many homes.  
They choose you.

Perhaps I would give much for assurance.  
I have never been offered a bargain.  
An old game played by two persons throwing three dice,  
This too is passage.  
In my house  
the passage from the door leads to the kitchen  
then off to the bath.  
I take long baths  
putting milk on my face  
leaving the door open to the smells of the kitchen.  
But it is all in passing  
in a hasty manner  
cursorily  
that I continue.

*Carole Glasser*

*Carole Glasser is a songwriter and a poet. She lives in an apartment with a large terrace and a large dog.*

## Some Unsaid Things

I was not going to say  
how you lay with me

nor where your hands went  
& left their light impressions

nor whose face was white  
as a splash of moonlight

nor who spilled the wine  
nor whose blood stained the sheet

nor which one of us wept  
to set the dark bed rocking

nor what you took me for  
nor what I took you for

nor how your fingertips  
in me were roots

light roots torn leaves put down—  
nor what you tore from me

nor what confusion came  
of our twin names

nor will I say whose body  
opened, sucked, whispered

like the ocean, unbalancing  
what had seemed a safe position

*Joan Larkin*

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*Joan Larkin's first book of poems is entitled Housework. She is co-editor of Amazon Poetry: An Anthology of Lesbian Poetry. Both books were published by Out and Out Books, a women's independent press she helped to start in 1975.*

# CONDITIONS FOR WORK: The Common World Of Women

ADRIENNE RICH

... the common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our life-span into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn into it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us. But such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public. It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men [sic] may want to save from the natural ruin of time.<sup>1</sup>

Women both have and have not a common world. The mere sharing of oppression does not constitute a common world. Our thought and action, insofar as it has taken the form of difference, assertion, or rebellion, has repeatedly been obliterated, or subsumed under "human history, which means the "publicity of the public realm" created and controlled by men. Our history is the history of a majority of the species, yet the struggles of women for a "human" status have been relegated to footnotes, to the sidelines. Above all, women's relationships with women have been denied or neglected as a force in history.<sup>2</sup>

The essays in this book are parts of a much larger work, which we are still struggling to possess: the long process of making visible the experience of women. The tentativeness, the anxiety, sometimes approaching paralysis, the confusions, described in many of these essays by intelligent, educated, "privileged" women, are themselves evidence of the damage that can be done to creative energy by the lack of a sense of continuity, historical validation, community. Most women, it seems, have gone through their travails in a kind of spiritual isolation, alone both in the present and in ignorance of their place in any female tradition. The support of friends, of a women's group, may make survival possible; but it is not enough.

It is quite clear that the universities and the intellectual establishment intend to keep women's experiences as far as possible invisible; and women's studies a barely subsidized, condescendingly tolerated ghetto. The majority of women who go through undergraduate and graduate school suffer an intellectual coercion of which they are not even consciously aware. In a world where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence.

Writing of the destruction of the civilization of Languedoc by the forces of the Church under Simon de Montfort, Simone Weil reminds us: "Nothing is more cruel to the past than the commonplace which asserts that spiritual values cannot be destroyed by force; on the strength of this belief, civilizations that have been destroyed by force of arms are denied the name of civilization; and there is no risk of our being refuted by the dead."<sup>3</sup> For spiritual values and a creative tradition to continue unbroken we need concrete artifacts, the work of hands, written words to read, images to look at, a dialogue with brave and imaginative women who came before us. In the false names of love, motherhood, natural law—false because they have not been defined by us to whom they are applied—women in patriarchy have been withheld from building a common world, except in enclaves, or through coded messages.

The protection and preservation of the world against natural processes are among the toils which need the monotonous performance of daily repeated chores... In old tales and mythological stories it has often assumed the grandeur of heroic fights against overwhelming odds, as in the account of Hercules, whose cleansing of the Augean stables is among the twelve heroic "labors." A similar connotation of heroic deeds requiring great strength and courage and performed in a fighting spirit is manifest in the mediaeval use of the word: labor, *travail*, *arbeit*. However, the daily fight in which the human body is engaged to keep the world clean and prevent its decay bears little resemblance to heroic deeds; the endurance it needs to repair every day anew the waste of yesterday is not courage, and what makes the effort painful is not danger but its relentless repetition.<sup>4</sup>

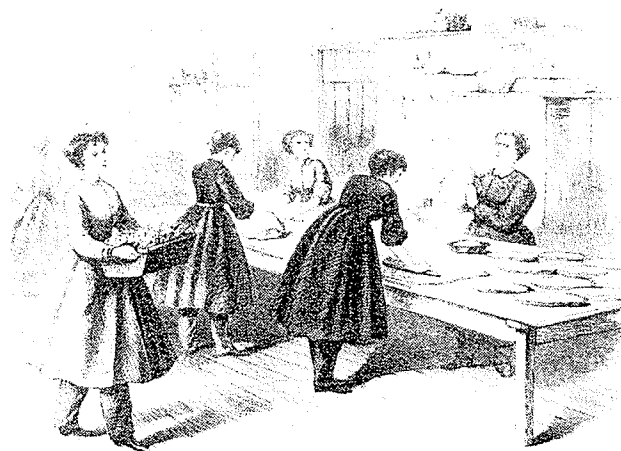
Hannah Arendt does not call this "woman's work." Yet it is this activity of world-protection, world-preservation, world-repair, the million tiny stitches, the friction of the scrubbing brush, the scouring-cloth, the iron across the shirt, the rubbing of cloth against itself to exorcise the stain, the renewal of the scorched pot, the rusted knife-blade, the invisible weaving of a frayed and threadbare family life, the cleaning-up of soil and waste left behind by men and children—that we have been charged to do "for love"—not merely unpaid, but unacknowledged by the political philosophers. Women are not described as "working" when we create the essential conditions for the work of men; we are supposed to be acting out of love, instinct, or devotion to some higher cause than self.

Arendt tells us that the Greeks despised all labor of

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*This article appears as the foreword to Working It Out, edited by Pamela Daniels and Sally Ruddick, published by Pantheon.*

Communal kitchen of the Oneida Community. from Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper*, April 9, 1870.



the body necessitated by biological needs. It was to spare themselves such labor that men kept slaves—not as a means to cheaper production. “Contempt for laboring, originally arising out of a passionate striving for freedom from necessity and a no less passionate impatience with every effort that left no trace, no monument, no great work worthy of remembrance, spread with the increasing demands of *polis* life upon the time of the citizens (i.e., males) and its insistence on their abstention from all but political activities.”<sup>5</sup>

And, in the aside of a footnote: “Women and slaves belonged and lived together. . . no woman, not even the wife of the household head, lived among her equals—other free women—so that rank depended much less on birth than on ‘occupation’ or function. . . .” According to the index, this footnote is the last reference to women, on page 73 of a volume of 325 pages on *The Human Condition*, written by a woman.

*Every effort that left no trace. . . .* The efforts of women in labor, giving birth to stillborn children, children who must die of plague or by infanticide; the efforts of women to keep filth and decay at bay, children decently clothed, to produce the clean shirt in which the man walks out daily into the common world of men, the efforts to raise children against the attritions of racist and sexist schooling, drugs, sexual exploitation, the brutalization and killing of barely grown boys in war. There is still little but contempt and indifference for this kind of work, these efforts. (The phrase “wages for housework” has the power to shock today that the phrase “free love” possessed a century ago.)

## 2.

There is a natural temptation to escape if we can, to close the door behind us on this despised realm which threatens to engulf all women, whether as mothers, or in marriage, or as the invisible, ill-paid sustainers of the professions and social institutions. There is a natural fear that if we do not enter the common world of men, as asexual beings or as “exceptional” women, do not enter it on its terms and obey its rules, we will be sucked back into the realm of servitude, whatever our temporary class status or privileges. This temptation and this fear compromise our powers, divert our energies, form a potent source of “blocks” and of acute anxiety about work.

For if, in trying to join the common world of men, the professions moulded by a primarily masculine consciousness, we split ourselves off from the common life

of women and deny our female heritage and identity in our work, we lose touch with our real powers, and with the essential condition for all fully realized work: community.

Feminism begins, but cannot end, with the discovery by an individual of her self-consciousness as a woman. It is not, finally, even the recognition of her reasons for anger, or the decision to change her life, go back to school, leave a marriage (though in any individual life such decisions can be momentous and require great courage). Feminism means finally that we renounce our obedience to the fathers, and recognize that the world they have described is not the whole world. Masculine ideologies are the creation of masculine subjectivity; they are neither objective, nor value-free, nor inclusively “human.” Feminism implies that we recognize fully the inadequacy for us, the distortion, of male-created ideologies; and that we proceed to think, and act, out of that recognition.

In the common world of men, in the professions which the writers of these essays have come to grips with, it takes more than our *individual* talent and intelligence to think and act further. In denying the validity of women’s experience, in pretending to stand for “the human,” masculine subjectivity tries to force us to name our truths in an alien language; to dilute them; we are constantly told that the “real” problems, the ones worth working on, are those men have defined, that the problems we need to examine are trivial, unscholarly, non-existent. We are urged to separate the “personal” (our entire existence as women) from the “scholarly” or “professional.” Several of the women who contribute to this book have described the outright insults and intellectual sabotage they encountered as women in graduate school. But more insidious may be the sabotage which appears as paternal encouragement, approval granted for internalizing a masculine subjectivity. As Tillie Olsen puts it, “Not to be able to come to one’s own truth or not to use it in one’s writing, even in telling the truth to have to ‘tell it slant,’ robs one of drive, of conviction, limits potential stature.” Everywhere, women working in the common world of men are denied that integrity of work and life which we can only find in an emotional and intellectual connectedness with ourselves and other women.

More and more, however, women are creating community, sharing work, and discovering that in the sharing of work our relationships with each other become larger and more serious. In organizing a women’s self-help clinic or law collective, a writing workshop, in



editing a magazine, creating a center for women's work like the Women's Building in Los Angeles, in running a press that publishes "lost" books by women, or contemporary work that may be threatening or incomprehensible to male editors, in participating in a women's prison project or a crisis center, we come to understand at first-hand not only our unmet needs, but the resources we can draw on for meeting them even in the face of female poverty, the hostility of institutions, the lack of documentation of our shared past. Susan Griffin has said that, for a feminist, writing may be solitary but thinking is collective. Any woman who has moved from the playing-fields of male discourse into the realm where women are developing our own descriptions of the world, knows the extraordinary sense of shedding, as it were, the encumbrance of someone else's baggage, of ceasing to translate. It is not that thinking becomes easy, but that the difficulties are intrinsic to the work itself rather than to the environment. In the common world of men, the struggle to make female experience visible—will they take seriously a thesis on women? Will they let me teach a course on women? Can I speak bluntly of female experience without shattering the male egos around me, or being labeled hysterical, castrating?—such struggles assume the status of an intellectual problem, and the real intellectual problems may not be probed at all.

Working together as women, consciously creating our networks even where patriarchal institutions are the ones in which we have to survive, we can confront the problems of women's relationships, the mothers we came from, the sisters with whom we were forced to divide the world, the daughters we love and fear. We can challenge and inspire each other, throw light on one another's blind spots, stand by and give courage at the birth-throes of one another's insights. I think of the poet H.D.'s account of the vision she had on the island of Corfu, in the *Tribute to Freud*:

And there I sat and there is my friend Bryher who has brought me to Greece. I can turn now to her, though I do not budge an inch or break the sustained crystal-gazing at the wall before me. I say to Bryher, "There have been pictures here—I thought they were shadows at first, but they are light, not shadow. They are quite simple objects—but of course it's very strange. I can break away from them now, if I want—it's just a matter of concentrating—what do you think? Shall I stop? Shall I go on?" Bryher says without hesitation, "Go on."

... I had known such extraordinarily gifted and charming people. They had made much of me or they had slighted me and yet neither praise nor neglect mattered in the face of the gravest issues—life, death. . . . And yet, so oddly, I knew that this experience, this writing-on-the-wall before me, could not be shared with anyone except the girl who stood so bravely there beside me. This girl had said without hesitation, "Go on." It was she really who had the detachment and integrity of the Pythoness of Delphi. But it was I, battered and disassociated. . . . who was seeing the pictures, and who was reading the writing or granted the inner vision. Or perhaps, in some sense, we were "seeing" it together, for without her, admittedly, I could not have gone on.<sup>6</sup>

Even for those who would mistrust visionary experience, the episode is revealing as metaphor. The personal relationship helps create the conditions for work (out of her

vision H.D. went on to create her great, late, long poems celebrating a matriarchal world and the quest of female heroes); no less does the fact of working together deepen and sustain a personal relationship. "If Chloe likes Olivia and they share a laboratory. . . . this of itself will make their friendship more varied and lasting because it will be less personal."<sup>7</sup> By "like" I believe Virginia Woolf (still, in that book, writing more cautiously than later in *Three Guineas*) also meant "love"; for "a laboratory" we can read "the creation of a common world."

Many women have known the figure of the male "mentor" who guides and protects his female student or colleague, tenderly opening doors for her into the common world of men. He seems willing to share his power, to conspire with her in stealing what Celia Gilbert names in this book "the sacred fire" of work. Yet what can he really bestow but the *illusion* of power, a power stolen, in any case, from the mass of women, over centuries, by men? He can teach her to name her experience in language that may allow her to live, work, perhaps succeed in the common world of men. But he has no key to the powers she might share with other women.

There is also the illusion that if you make your emotional and erotic life with women, it does not matter that your intellectual work is a collaboration with silence and lying about female experience. At a panel of lesbian writers at the Modern Language Association in San Francisco in December 1975, Susan Griffin spoke of the damages we do to ourselves and our work in censoring our own truths:

I feel that this whole idea of the Muse, of inspiration, is a kind of cop-out. There is something very fascinating going on with a writer's psyche when you are undergoing a silence, an inability to write. Each silence and each eruption into speech constitute a kind of struggle in the life of a writer. . . . The largest struggle around silence in my life has had to do with the fact that I am a woman and a lesbian. When I recognized my feelings as a woman, when I recognized my anger as a woman, suddenly my writing was transformed—suddenly I had a material, a subject-matter. . . . And then a few years later I found myself unhappy with my writing, unhappy with the way I expressed myself, unable to speak; I wrote in a poem, *Words do not come to my mouth any more*. And I happened also. . . . to be censoring the fact that I was a lesbian. I thought that I was doing this because of the issue of child custody, and that was and still is a serious issue. But I wasn't acknowledging how important it was to me, both as a writer and as a human being, to be able to. . . . write about my feelings as a lesbian.

In fact, I think that writers are always dealing with taboos of one sort or another; if they are not taboos general in society, you may just have a fear in your private life of perceiving some truth because of its implications, and that will stop you from writing. . . . But when we come to the taboo of lesbianism, this is one which is most loaded for everyone, even those who are not lesbians. Because the fact of love between women. . . . is one which affects every event in this society, psychic and political and sociological. And for a writer, the most savage center is oneself.<sup>8</sup>

The whole question of what it means, or might mean, to work as a lesbian might have occupied an entire essay in this book. Of past women whose thought and work have remained visible in history, an enormous number have been lesbians, yet because of the silence and

denial that has enveloped lesbianism, we learn little from women's biographies about the relation of their work to their relationships with women or to the social taboos they lived among. One writer in this book mourns that "there was only one Alice B. Toklas." But in fact women's support to women *has* been there all along, lifetime or long-term comradeships. For many women, struggling for economic survival in the common world of men, these relationships have had to be dissimulated, at what cost to the work (let alone the relationships) we cannot begin to know. Every lesbian has been forced to walk past the distorting mirrors of homophobia before she could get down to the real problems of her work. Every lesbian artist knows that when she attempts to embody lesbian sexuality in her work she runs the risk of having it perceived pornographically, if it is not simply denied visibility. When a lesbian feels she may have to choose between writing or painting her truths and keeping her child, she is flung back on the most oppressive ground of maternal guilt in conflict with creative work. The question of economic survival, of keeping one's job, is terribly real, but the more terrible questions lie deeper where a woman is forced, or permits herself, to lead a censored life.

### 3

In thinking about the issues of women and work raised in this book, I turned to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* to see how a major political philosopher of our time, a woman, greatly respected in the intellectual establishment, had spoken to the theme. I found her essay illuminating, not so much for what it says, but for what it is. The issue of women as the laborers in reproduction, of women as workers in production, of the relationship of women's unpaid labor in the home to the separation between "private" and "public" spheres, of the woman's body as commodity—these questions were not raised for the first time in the 1960's and 1970's; they had already been documented in the 1950's when *The Human Condition* was being written. Arendt barely alludes, usually in a footnote, to Marx and Engels' engagement with these questions; and she writes as if the work of Olive Schreiner, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emma Goldman, Jane Addams, to name only a few writers, had never existed. The withholding of women from participation in the *vita activa*, the "common world," and the connection of this with reproductivity, is something from which she does not so much turn her eyes as stare straight through unseeing. This "great work" is thus a kind of failure for which masculine ideology has no name, precisely because in terms of that ideology it is successful, at the expense of truths the ideology considers irrelevant. To read such a book, by a woman of large spirit and great erudition, can be painful, because it embodies the tragedy of the female mind nourished on male ideologies. In fact, the loss is ours, because Arendt's desire to grasp deep moral issues is the kind of concern we need to build a common world which will amount to more than "life-styles." The power of male ideology to possess such a female mind, to disconnect it as it were from the female body which encloses it and which it encloses, is nowhere more striking than in Arendt's lofty and crippled book.

Women's minds cannot grow to full stature, or touch

the real springs of our power to alter reality, on a diet of masculine ideology. This is not the same thing as saying that we can use nothing of these ideologies, or their methods; or that we need not understand them. But the common world of men cannot give us what we need, and parts of it are poisoning us. Miriam Schapiro, in this book, describes the process through which she begins to work: filling sheets of paper with smeared paint, images created "freely, mindlessly," going back to that place in childhood where she simply painted and was happy. To her husband, this appeared as "de-professionalizing" herself. Yet the very concept of "professionalism," tainted as it is with the separation between personal life and work, with a win-or-lose mentality and the gauging of success by public honors and market prices, needs a thorough revaluation by women. Forty years back Virginia Woolf was asking:

What is this "civilization" in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading, the procession of the sons of educated men?<sup>9</sup>

Her answer was that it is leading to war, to elitism, to exploitation and the greed for power; in our own time we can also add that it has clearly been leading to the ravagement of the non-human living world. Instead of the concept of "professionalism," we need, perhaps, a vision of work akin to that described by Simone Weil in her "Theoretical Picture of a Free Society":

A clear view of what is possible and what impossible, what is easy and what difficult, of the labors that separate the project from its accomplishment—this alone does away with insatiable desires and vain fears; from this and not from anything else proceed moderation and courage, virtues without which life is nothing but a disgraceful frenzy. Besides, the source of any kind of virtue lies in the shock produced by the human intelligence being brought up against a matter devoid of lenience and of falsity.<sup>10</sup>

If we conceive of feminism as more than a frivolous label, if we conceive of it as an ethics, a methodology, a more complex way of thinking about, thus more responsibly acting upon, the conditions of human life, we need a self-knowledge which can only develop through a steady, passionate attention to *all* female experience. I cannot imagine a feminist evolution leading to radical change in the private/political realm of gender, that is not rooted in the conviction that all women's lives are important, that the lives of men cannot be understood by burying the lives of women; and that to make visible the full meaning of women's experience, to re-interpret knowledge in terms of that experience, is now the most important task of thinking.

If this is so, we cannot work alone. We had better face the fact that our hope of thinking at all, against the force of a maimed and maiming world-view, depends on seeking and giving our allegiance to a community of women co-workers. And, beyond the exchange and criticism of work, we have to ask ourselves how we can make the conditions for work more possible, not just for ourselves but for each other. This is not a question of generosity. It is not generosity that makes women in community support and nourish each other. It is rather what Whitman called the "hunger for equals"—the

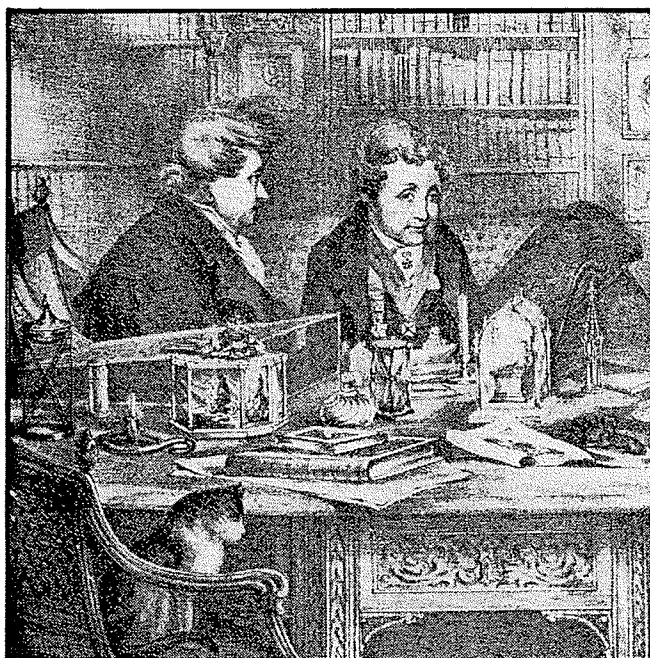
desire for a context in which our own strivings will be amplified, quickened, lucidified, through those of our peers.

We also, of course, need community with our past. Women's art and thought and action will continue to be seen as deviant, its true meaning distorted or buried, as long as women's work can be dismissed as "exceptional," an interesting footnote to the major texts. Or, it will be encouraged for its timidities and punished for its daring. This is obvious to women who have tried to work along seriously feminist lines in the established professions. But even before the work exists, long before praise or attack, the very form it will assume, the courage on which it can draw, the sense of potential direction it may take, require—given the politics of our lives and of creation itself—more than the gifts of the individual woman, or her immediate contemporaries. We need access to the female past.

The problem, finally, is not that of who does housework and child-care, whether or not one can find a life-companion who will share in the sustenance and repair of daily life—crucial as these may be in the short run. It is a question of the community we are reaching for in our work, and on which we can draw; who we envision as our hearers, our co-creators, our challengers; who will urge us to take our work further, more seriously, than we had dared; on whose work we can build. Women *have* done these things for each other, sought each other in community, even if only in enclaves, often through correspondence, for centuries. Denied space in the universities, the scientific laboratories, the professions, we have devised our networks. We must not be tempted to trade the possibility of enlarging and strengthening those networks, and of extending them to more and more women, for the illusion of power and success as "exceptional" or "privileged" women in the professions.

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 55.
2. The historian Joan Kelly-Gadol suggests that a feminist view of history is not merely "compensatory history," a parallel to the accepted views of history as male. It means "to look at ages or movements of great social change in terms of their liberation or repression of woman's potential, their import for the advancement of her humanity as well as his. The moment this is done—the moment one assumes that women are a part of humanity in the fullest sense—the period or set of events with which we deal takes on a wholly different character or meaning from the normally accepted one. Indeed, what emerges is a fairly regular pattern of relative loss of status for women in those periods of so-called progressive change." ("The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," in *SIGNS*, Vol. 1, #4, Summer 1976.)
3. Simone Weil, *Selected Essays 1934-1943*. Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 43.
4. Arendt, p. 55.
5. Arendt, pp. 81-83.
6. H.D., *Tribute to Freud*. Carcanet Press, Oxford, 1971, pp. 50-54.
7. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. Hogarth Press, London, 1929, p. 126.
8. *Sinister Wisdom*, Vol. I, #2, Fall 1976.
9. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938). Harbinger Book, New York, 1966, p. 63.
10. Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*. Translated by Arthur Wills and John Petrie. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Mass., 1973, p. 87.

Adrienne Rich's most recent books are *Poems Selected and New: 1950-1974* and *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, both published by W.W. Norton, and *Twenty-One Love Poems*, published by Effie's Press, Emeryville California.



Sarah Ponsonby (1755-1831) and Eleanor Butler (1739-1829), known as the Ladies of Llangollen, were born in Ireland but left their homes at an early age, to spend the rest of their lives together in the small Welsh village of Llangollen. They were a curiosity of their day; several articles about their "romantic friendship" were written and their farmhouse became something of an intellectual center in Great Britain. Louisa Gordon wrote a novel, *The Chase of the Wild Goose*, based on their lives, which was originally published by Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press. In 1971 Elizabeth Mavor published a biography entitled *The Ladies of Llangollen*.

## Sometimes, as a child

when the Greek sea  
was exceptionally calm  
the sun not so much a pinnacle  
as a perspiration of light, your brow and the sky  
meeting on the horizon, sometimes

you'd dive  
from the float, the pier, the stone  
promontory, through water so startled  
it held the shape of your plunge, and there

in the arrested heat of the afternoon  
without thought, effortless  
as a mantra turning  
you'd turn  
in the paused wake of your dive, enter  
the suck of the parted waters, you'd emerge

clean caesarean, flinging  
live rivulets from your hair, your own  
breath arrested. Something immaculate, a chance

crucial junction: time, light, water  
had occurred, you could feel your bones  
glisten  
translucent as spinal fins.

In rain-  
green Oregon now, approaching thirty, sometimes  
the same  
rare concert of light and spine  
resonates in my bones, as glistening  
starfish, lover, your fingers  
beach up.

*Olga Broumas*

## Artemis

Let's not have tea. White wine  
eases the mind along  
the slopes  
of the faithful body, helps

any memory once engraved  
on the twin  
chromosome ribbons, emerge, tentative  
from the archaeology of an excised past.

I am a woman  
who understands  
the necessity of an impulse whose goal or origin  
still lie beyond me. I keep the goat

for more  
than the pastoral reasons. I work  
in silver the tongue-like forms  
that curve round a throat

an arm-pit, the upper  
thigh, whose significance stirs in me  
like a curviform alphabet  
that defies

decoding, appears  
to consist of vowels, beginning with O, the O-  
mega, horseshoe, the cave of sound.  
What tiny fragments

survive, mangled into our language.  
I am a woman committed to  
a politics  
of transliteration, the methodology

of a mind  
stunned at the suddenly  
possible shifts of meaning—for which  
like amnesiacs

in a ward on fire, we must  
find words  
or burn.

*Olga Broumas*

Reprinted by permission of Yale University Press from *Beginning with O* by Olga Broumas, 1977.

*Olga Broumas was born in Greece and now lives in Oregon where she teaches women's studies. Her books are Beginning with O (Yale University Press) and Caritas (Jackrabbit Press). She won the 1976 Yale Younger Poet's award.*

ULRIKE OTTINGER - TABEA BLUMENSCHNEIN

TEXTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS FROM PROJECTS, FILMS AND PERFORMANCE  
BERLIN '77



Film ABC - relating to THE INFATUATION OF THE BLUE SAILORS  
with texts from Apollinaire

AMORE

ARTE

AZUR

APOLLINAIRE, Guillaume Albert Wladimir Alexandre Apollinaire de  
Kostrowitzky, born the 26th. of August 1880 in Rome

BETOERUNG DER BLAUEN MATROSEN (german title)  
Before the flower of friendship faded - friendship faded  
(Gertrude Stein)

Cash (engl.: Kasch) - barzahlung

Die du so schon bist (you who are so beautiful)  
Documents trouve de Morenhout et Tabea  
Das schwatzende Insekt (the prattling insect)

Evita Peron (I am even less forgiving than my friend)

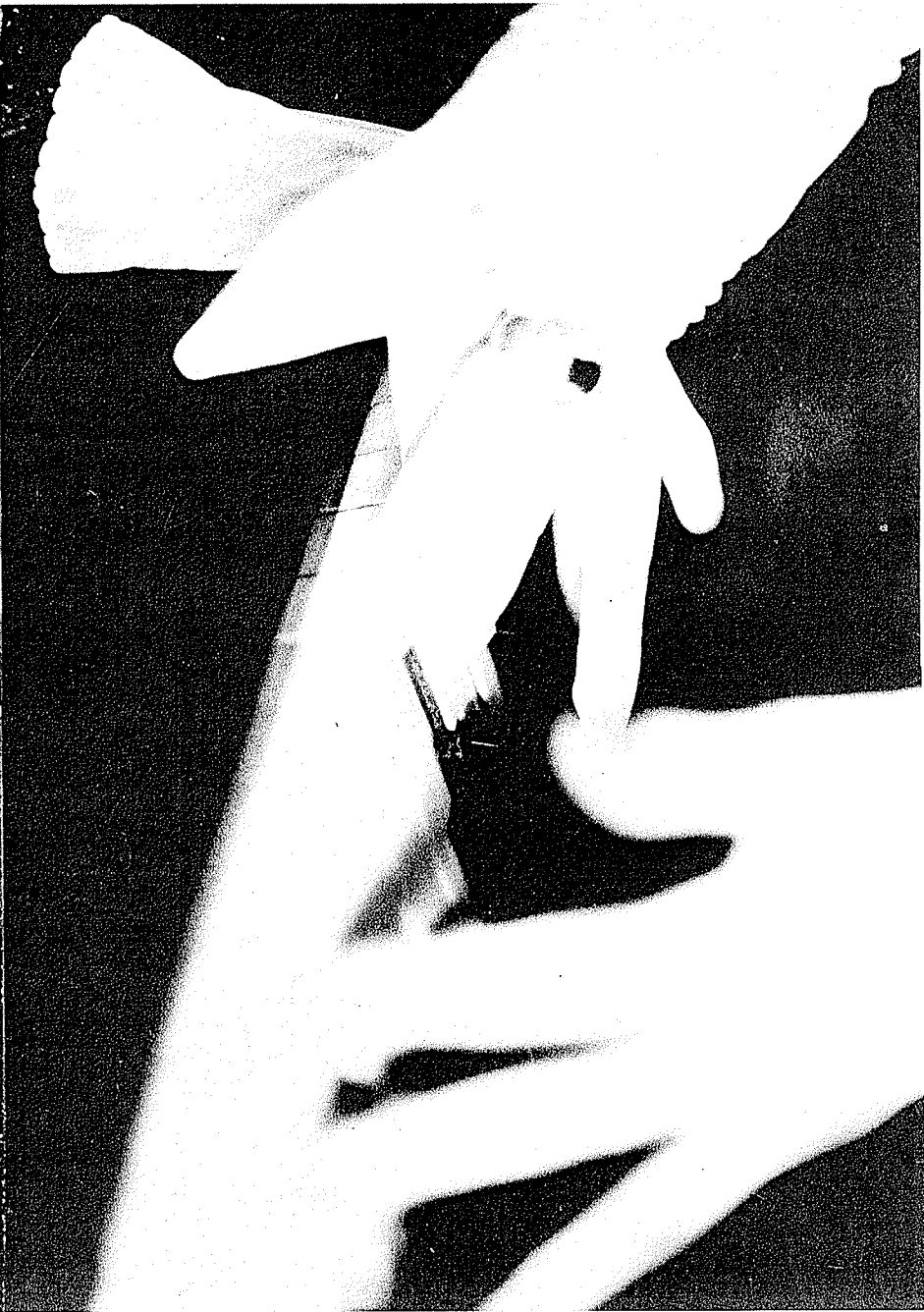
Fernrohr	(binoculars)
Feder	(feather)
Flugel	(wing)
Flugge	(fledged)
Fliegen	(fly)
oder	(or)
Frauen gemeinsam sind stark	Women together are strong)
G.....	

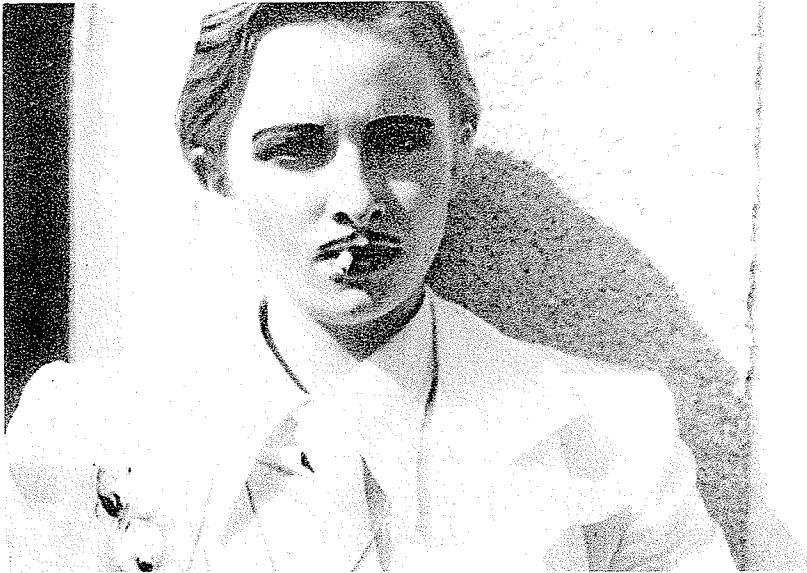
above: photograph from performance: TRANSFORMER-DEFORMER 1974 in  
Paramedia, Berlin

next pages: photographs from the scenario of THE PORTRAYAL OF A  
DRINKING WOMAN.









above: Jimmy Junod

content: the story of a woman, Esmeralda del Rio, who assumes various masculine and feminine roles .....that of the widow Olimpia Vincitor, Linda MacNamara the skater, as Jimmy Junod the gigolo...

.....  
"This concept of irony was also made use of in our first film 'Laokoon and Sons' when Esmeralda del Rio changes into a grotesque persiflage of the mechanised manifestations of western culture."

FAIRY TALES ARE COMING

introduction text to the film:

1. Music  
Voice 1: Fairy tales are coming  
Voice 2: Fairy tales are here to stay  
Voice 3: I am a picture  
Voice 4: I am a fairy tale  
Voice 5: And this is the sound of music
2. Title of film  
Voice 2: This is Laokoon and Sons
3. Voice 1: Laokoon and Sons is a story for all seasons. One or two or three or a hundred voices tell this story for the pleasure of your eyes and ears.  
Voice 2: These are women's voices.



DIE BETORUNG DER BLAUEN MATROSEN  
THE INFATUATION OF THE BLUE SAILORS  
16mm. colour. 47 mins. 1975

Appearing in the film:

The protagonists of the film:

1. A siren
2. A hawaiian girl
3. Two sailors
4. An old bird
5. A young bird
6. Two sailors, one of whom survives

Figures from an almost forgotten world:

1. The greek god Tunte (Tunte-Queen)
2. An old american filmstar
3. A russian mother of silent film
4. A nymph of German romanticism

About the collage system in our film:

Unlike other contemporary films this film, for the most part, makes use of a collage system, aimed at breaking the rules and undermining the expectations in an audience's identification by means of interruptions, irritations, and ironical alienations. In the collage system various different areas of concern and 'quotations' are interlaced, quotes from commercialized everyday life, musical quotes ranging from noises and sacred gongs, via hawaiian music, Schuricke melodies and Musette waltzes, to Burmese chants and cult rythms of the Cetchac... 'language' quotes-literary texts by Apollinaire, which have themselves already made use of the 'quotation approach'...snippets from the world of american showbusiness (the old Hollywood star), lamentations of a russian mother of silent film, the affected outrage of a greek tunte god, the sentimental folksong of the nymph of german romanticism.

About the irony in the film:

In the film irony is understood as social control over the mechanisation of life: 'When we have broken with the old world, when we are in a state of flux between two worlds....then satire, the grotesque, caricature, the clown and the doll emerge; what is at the bottom of this form of expression is the wish to let us imagine another life, by showing us how this life is apparently and actually paralysed in a puppet-like, mechanical state.' (Raoul Hausmann)  
-extract from a conversation between Ulrike Ottinger, Tabea Blumenschein and Hanne Bergius.

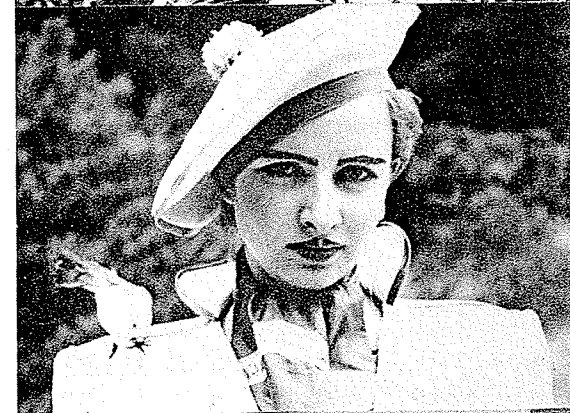
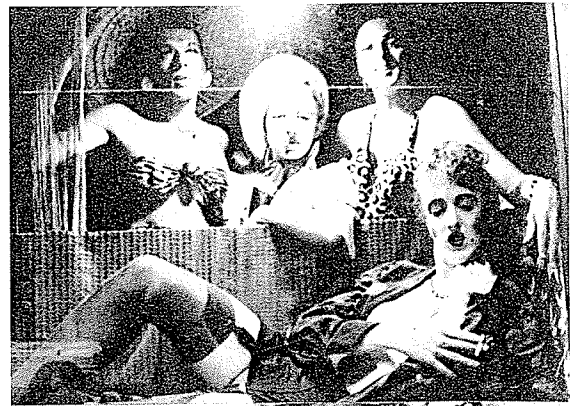






photo: the chinese pirate queen  
LAI CHO SAN aboard her  
junk in 1930

Scenario: MADAME X - THE ABSOLUTE EMPRESS

A pirate film with women - shooting to begin  
May '77

Because of its isolated island character a ship, and even more a pirate ship, was always a meeting place for all dissatisfaction, the right place for a group of dissatisfied women who wish to rebel against a limiting civilisation and to try to break out together, out of the roles laid down for them. But the women are also prisoners on this ship. Prisoners of the sea (physically), still prisoners of the civilisation that they have left, which has left the habits of passivity and reliance stored up in their character structure. Despite these unfavorable circumstances the rebellion occurs.

text from the script:

They take an oath on the flag with the bleeding heart and crossed cutlasses, on Madame X - their charismatic empress, and on the letters L and A which stand for LOVE AND ADVENTURE.

All the hidden frustrations come together to produce a powerful force and with favourable winds they sail away.

*Ulrike Ottinger was born in Konstanz, southern Germany, in 1942. In 1969 she opened a gallery in Konstanz and in 1972 moved with Tabea Blumenschein to Berlin, where they now reside. They just finished shooting their third film on the lake of Konstanz near the Alps. Partly financed by ZDF-TV in Germany, Madame X is about women pirates.*



From that moment on, she disowned the child.

I was the child.

Educated in suitcases, lonely without maps, I pressed an ear to my diary in the nights, listened for the vague red stirrings of its heart.

I could feel without looking how one town became the next, slight shift up or down on the scale of chagrin. So this was civilization: running water and laws.

I was a saleswoman. Landladies liked me, though I talked about vacuum cleaners, left brochures in the cookie jars, gave supple demonstrations of equipment before dinner. I swept and I sold in the wrinkles of the heartland. I called it a good life.

There in the little towns darkness sighs away in the arms of each cricket. The mornings bring no new disaster. Night comes again. The rooming house creaks with longing for its own flustered century.

I'd pile my coins along the nightstand for counting. I'd make fragile plans for the life to come.

Really I thought nothing of the days that I'd passed through,

nothing of the nights that had passed over me.

I bound up my samples. The next house. The next house.

"Young ladies like you 'n them handy dandies, them sweepers, oughta head fer the tall times 'n the bold times of the City." That's what the farmers sometimes told me in the mornings when they pushed back their cap brims, made decisions about the sun. Haw de haw haw them tall times them bold times.

But I could see it. The City. A line in each road there. A guitar in each doorway. I learned that the blues is a bunch of fat people. I enrolled at a club for the timid. Yes that's how I came to the City. I was young.

I rented a cardboard room in the quiet zone.

Oh the tentative web of fashion spread its lace around my throat.

Every night I pulled out from under the bed the hat box I'd painted in animals. My finery! Black feathered hat. Stylish gloves small from washing. I'd hear the landlady shut the oven on her frozen dinner, watch the light of the teevee dance over the walls.

Outside the harsh things were fading along the Avenue. I called out "Carumba! Muchachos!" in the streets. Me without other words for uncertainty and joy.

Cynthia Carr

*Cynthia Carr wrote articles for the Chicago daily newspapers for four years and was a member of the Lavender Woman collective. Her work appears in Amazon Quarterly's anthology, The Lesbian Reader.*

# Natalie Barney on *Renée Vivien*

Translated by Margaret Porter

Natalie Barney stood at the center of that group we usually refer to as "the Paris lesbians." Famous for both her love affairs and her literary salon, Barney's circle included Gertrude Stein, Romaine Brooks, Djuna Barnes and Colette, as well as Jean Cocteau, Andre Gide, Ezra Pound, and others.

Barney was a writer herself but little of her work has appeared in English, and she is more talked about than read. She was alive until 1972 but remains enigmatic, a "legend," the blonde Amazon who rode horseback in the Bois de Boulogne every morning. "She was charming," wrote Sylvia Beach in *Shakespeare and Company*. "Many of her sex found her fatally so..."

The following excerpt from one of her last books chronicles an important relationship in Barney's life, that with poet Renée Vivien.

In the article, Barney first describes her own girlhood in Cincinnati and Paris, then a love affair with Liane de Pougy, a courtesan. As this affair is ending, she is introduced to Renée Vivien by a mutual friend, Violette Shilletto. Both women are about twenty years old at this time, and Barney, absorbed with thoughts of Liane, pays little attention to Renée until she hears some of her poetry...

One evening Renée invited me for the first time into her room at the family boarding house, rue Crevaux. "To render it worthy of my coming" she had filled it with lilies, the flower that she had dedicated to me: "You will wither one day, ah! My lily!"

Meanwhile, it was the lilies which were withering. There were some of them in a too narrow jar of water and even on her bed. Their whiteness illuminated the somber corners of the room: it was a splendor, a suffocation, transforming this ordinary room into an ardent and virginal chapel inclining us toward genuflection—she before me, I before her.

I left her at dawn. The snow, last innocence of winter, had disappeared, but a light frost covered the ground where my footsteps imprinted themselves on this pallor between her street and mine.

Disturbing beginnings where two young girls sought each other by way of a love badly shared.

The yet somnolent senses of Renée scarcely responded to my desires; her budding love, exalted by imagination, appropriated my role of lover-poet. After each rendezvous, "for the night was to us as to others the day," I received from her flowers and poems, from which I choose these several fragments as so many avowals retracing the beginnings of our strange liaison:

See, I am of the age when the virgin abandons her hand  
To the man that her weakness looks for and fears  
And I have not chosen a companion of the route  
Because you appeared at the turning of the way.

... I feel tremble on my mute lips  
The gentleness and fright of your first kiss.  
Under your step, I hear the breaking of lyres...

With what kisses charm the languor of your soul...  
With what rhythms of love, with what fervent poem  
Honor worthily her whose beauty  
Wears Desire on her forehead like a diadem?

Embarrassed by this excess of adoration, to which I would have preferred joys better shared, I loved however the verses that she wrote to me. I rendered count that this attitude of adoration, for which I was the pretext, was necessary to her, and that without really knowing me, she found, thanks to me, a new theme of inspiration to succeed death and solitude: love—but love under an aspect which, since Sappho, had scarcely found a poet.

Renée Vivien had just offered me a whole notebook written in the hand of a good scholar whose writing had not yet taken flight. Under the cover on parchment where figured a lily and a lyre of doubtful taste, she had inscribed: "To Natalie, for her alone." After reading and rereading her verses, inspired by me and surpassing my own, I wanted them to be published. Renée, who however "aspired to glory"—for she had a more lofty idea of it than I—consented to see them appear, but on condition that she sign her book only "R. Vivien." When this first collection of verse appeared, from Alphonse Lemerre, and under this initial could pass for that of a masculine first name, a young lecturer who flattered himself on discovering and launching future geniuses, took as subject these *Etudes et Preludes* and declared to his audience "how one feels the verses vibrant with love written by a very young man idolatrous of a first mistress." There was, in fact, cause to misunderstand:

You touch without embracing like the chimera...  
Your form is a gleam that leaves the hands empty...

As he continued his lecture on this gift, Renée and I, seized with foolish laughter, had to precipitously leave the hall. No one in the audience could guess the cause of this brusque departure.



Renée Vivien

As they began to ask my poetess for interviews and meetings, she feared being invaded and had herself represented by a governess of an aspect as anti-poetic as possible. This one had to make herself pass for Renée Vivien, which discouraged future pursuits and enthusiasms, for the rumor spread that the author of a work so troubling was deprived of all charm, eloquence or physical attraction.

A short time after, she took me to her home in London, where I was able to find in the celebrated bookstore of Bodley Head a copy of the fragments of Sappho, translated by Wharton (no connection with my compatriot the novelist Edith Wharton, who would have trembled with horror at the idea of a possible confusion). This precious collection served Renée Vivien for comparison with her French translation; it became her bedside book and the source from which she drew the pagan inspiration for several of her books to come. One is not pagan who wishes to be: I felt already in her a Christian soul which was ignored. While I leafed through other books, John Lane, the editor-publisher, pointed out *Opale*, the first book of verse of a young poetess of Norfolk, whose second collection he was going to publish soon.

Several of these poems pleased me to the point that I wrote to their author, adding to my word of admiration *Etude et Preludes* and *Quelques Portraits—Sonnets de Femmes*. *Opale* responded with fire:

... For I would dance to make you smile, and sing  
Of those who with some sweet mad sin have played,  
And how Love walks with delicate feet afraid  
Twixt maid and maid.

"Why," I said to Renée, "shouldn't we assemble around us a group of poetesses like those who surrounded Sappho at Mytilene and who mutually inspired each other?"

This project pleased her so much that we began to realize it by suggesting to *Opale* to come to be near us in Paris, where we were returning to install ourselves in a

small hotel on the rue Alphonse-de-Neuville, next to that of the Rostands. My parents reluctantly let me do it, but only after imposing on me, as chaperone, a housekeeper who had already been mine in a pension where I stayed when I was in transit at Paris. It is she, besides, who presented herself under the name of Renée to discourage the curious. The sympathetic Professor B.C. was also hired to teach Greek to Renée in view of a translation into French verse that she wished to do of the fragments of Sappho. After her lesson, he corrected for me a new book that I was preparing: *Five Little Greek Dialogues*. I made use also of his learned and difficult penmanship for a transcription of my *Letters to a Known*, in which I resumed my adventure with Liane. This work finished, I removed the ring that she had ordered for me at Lalique, and which carried, engraved on the inside: "It pleases me so much that you endure to understand and love me."

Renée wrote two versions of our novel lived: *A Woman Appeared to Me*. Influenced by the bad taste of our "belle époque," she gave me the impression of ceding to the worst weaknesses of the "art nouveau."

This poet hardly possesses the gift of a novelist and cannot, consequently, lend life either to the one or to the other of her heroines.

The first version, *Vally*, was composed when we were entangled, and the second when she restored to me the name "Lorely."

Vally and Lorely have the same undulating body and similar eyes "of ice under hair like moonlight."

The author doubtless wished to create an impression of magic, but the magic refused to operate and it was absurdity that replaced it. To give weight to this afflicting affirmation, I pick this detail of a decor that she must have believed bewitching: "A dried-out serpent entwined itself around a vase wherein some black irises withered." While "dressed in a white robe that veiled me while revealing me, I unstrung some opals, plucked petals from some orchids. . . ."

I should reproach Renée for the first of these fatal and artificial women made to resemble me, for in her second novel, from the mouth of this heroine, she makes me say, "In truth, each being becomes parallel to the appearance that our perversity forms of her: fear, by force of not comprehending me, to render me incomprehensible." In one of these books, she declares me "incapable of loving." I who have never been capable of anything but that! Opposing my love of love against her love of death, Renée esteems that I have had, by access only, to submit to this evil of the nineteenth century, "spleen," while she herself has made it the leitmotif of her life and her work.

That she had wished to go astray to such a point in suffering, proves to me how much her poetic genius had need of it.

Throughout the false mysticism by which she seems haunted, in a flash of lucidity she recognizes in me a reposing pagan soul. She recounts, in *A Woman Appeared to Me*, that I asked her on the day preceding Christmas, "What is this festival of Christmas? Does it commemorate the birth or the death of Christ?" Exaggeration for exaggeration, I prefer that to other distortions.

On rereading these two novels, I have the painful impression of having posed for a bad portraitist.

Barney relates next how she and Vivien traveled to New York and to the Barney home in Bar Harbor after the death of their friend Violette. Renée was deeply depressed. She continued her study of classical Greek with the hope of translating Sappho, while Barney attended dinners and balls at the will of her parents.

After a visit to Bryn Mawr College, the two separated in tears—Vivien to return to Europe and Barney to go to her parents' home in Washington, D.C., for she had promised to spend the winter with them.

I wrote in vain to Renée who, according to Mary S., had just installed herself in the large apartment on the ground floor and not in the little apartment planned and prepared at great expense by our governess. Mary S. saw her only in passing, so greatly busy was Renée with furnishing it in an original manner.

Was it this moving which prevented Renée from answering my letters? Or was it her book *Evocations* which had just appeared and which she had sent to me? Uneasy, I tried to understand through this book what could have provoked her silence: sometimes, reassured by her poems "for Atthis"—Atthis being one of the little names that she had given me—but surprised at being evoked in the past tense:

For I remember divine expectations,  
The shadow, and the feverish evenings of yesterday . . .  
Amidst sighs and ardent tears,  
I loved you, Atthis.

Several descriptive stanzas followed preceding this finale:

Here is what breathes and mounts with the flame,  
And the flight of songs and the breath of lilies,  
The intimate sob of the soul of my soul:  
I loved you, Atthis.

What is it that prevented a like feeling for living? I chafed with impatience and apprehension, attached to my duty of worldly frivolities without personal resources to escape. Finally, in the springtime, I returned to Paris with my family. Before even going up to my room in the Hotel D'Albe, I precipitated myself to Avenue du Bois, where the concierge informed me that "Mademoiselle went out just a moment ago."

I waited in the courtyard of Number 23. My heart beating, I perceived her finally arriving in an automobile and ran before it, when she gave the order to her chauffeur to go out again by the court at the end without stopping. Was it possible that she had not seen me? Or that she did not wish to see me? With a leap, I went to Violette's sister's house. Mary received me gently, but could not or would not inform me on this mystery. I spent some hours near her, in the hope that Renée would come up unexpectedly, and from this apartment situated just above that of Renée, I spied her apparition in the little garden. Fearing that the perfidious governess had intercepted the letter in which I announced my coming, I wished to have my heart clear about it and I had it, in fact, that same evening. Renée descended into her little garden accompanied by a sturdy person. The manner in which this person surrounded her with her arm left no ambiguity about their intimacy. She had then conquered Renée, but how? Certainly not by her physical appearance. Perhaps,



Liane de Pougy and Natalie Barney

under all that fat had she not only the authoritarian visage of a Valkyrie but a heart of gold? Renée had never aspired to all the useless luxury with which the new chosen one was surrounding her, her personal fortune having always more than sufficed for her needs. Who then could profit from this prodigality, if not our astute governess?

I prayed my friend Emma Calvé—who suffered equally from an abandonment and whom I had sought to comfort at the time of her triumphal tour in *Carmen* in the United States—to lend me her irresistible voice; and when night came, we disguised ourselves as street singers. She sang under the French windows of Renée Vivien: "I have lost my Eurydice, nothing can match my sorrow," while I pretended to pick up the pieces of money thrown from the other floors. Finally, Renée partly opened her glass door to better listen to this surprising voice which was attacking the celebrated aria: "Love is the child of Bohemia which has never known law." The moment having come, I threw my poem attached to a bouquet over the gate of the garden, so that she could see and pick it up. But as some passers-by began to surround us, we had to eclipse ourselves in the shadow before my *chanteuse*, recognized in the shadow thanks to her voice, was pursued by applause.

I soon received a reply to my sonnet from the governess, and not from Renée as I had hoped. Having collected verses and bouquets "destined to a person whom she had the good fortune to have in charge," the governess "prayed me to cease these dispatches, as distressing as they are useless."

If it is true that sentiments are not commanded on order, it is even more true that they are not countermanded! My rage having no equal but my anguish. I sent an S.O.S. to Eva,\* who arrived at once to be near me. Horrified to find me in such a state of despair, she went to plead my cause with Renée, who refused to see

\*A childhood friend of Natalie's, probably her first lover.



Olive Custance, known as *Opale*

me again. Her existence ("since it is, it appears, necessary to live") must suit her so according to all appearances, for she knew me bound to her flight and obsessed by her verses, while she, inspired by my memory, had no further need to be troubled by my presence.

I learned then the machinations of our governess. Abusing the credulous jealousy of Renée, she had persuaded her—with proofs to give it weight—that one of my suitors, the Count de la Palisse, had gone to the United States for the unique purpose of marrying me. How had Renée been able to believe such an absurdity? Perhaps because she violently repulsed the least advance of her suitors she understood nothing of my complaisances, and more, that the company of intelligent men interested and pleased me often more than that of a pretty woman? In general, I remained the fraternal friend of men. Why, besides, this "angry opposition" between Sodom and Gomorrah, instead of a sympathy without equivocation?

Balanced and sociable, I could not foresee the unreasonable changes of Renée, and I remained profoundly afflicted by them.

The crude ruse of our governess had moreover succeeded in throwing the poor and unhappy Renée into the arms of another! By what intrigues or what chance had those arms proved to be those of one of the richest women of the Israelite world? This strong and willful person was not only known for her prejudiced tastes, but for endowing her successive mistresses with a sumptuous dwelling and a life annuity. This prodigality did not explain to me why Renée, who already had a considerable fortune, had fallen into this gilded trap.

Our governess, after expensively furnishing the little apartment chosen and abandoned, had presided over the luxurious fitting-out of this large ground floor where all passed through her intervention, which did not prevent her from touching some wages as watch dog of the captive. A voluntary captive perhaps and one who, after the death of Violette and the lies adroitly accumulated against me, had immense need of quiet and security.

It was then that I received a dispatch from an Austrian princess, with whom Eva and I were connected. She alerted me that she had just arrived alone at Bayreuth. We departed then for the Wagnerian Festival, where we were able to procure two seats, thanks to connections of the princess. From the first presentation of the Tetralogy, I spotted Renée and contemplated her from our balcony. Eva went down right away to tell her that I was waiting for her up above. Renée, giving her place to Eva, came to sit beside me. Both being invaded by this music, our eyes, then our hands met in the shadow, and we found ourselves so again each evening.

On telling me farewell she promised me, tears in her eyes, to arrange to find me again before the end of this same month of August. Our rendezvous was set at Vienna, from where we would continue the trip together on the Orient Express toward Mytilene, by way of Constantinople.

This time she kept her word and I found her again with an unbounded exaltation but I had to hold back, for she remained on the defensive. However, she identified me with her cult for Lesbos, in writing:

Sweetness of my songs, let us go toward Mytilene.  
Here is where my soul has taken its flight.

Let us go toward the welcome of the adored virgins.  
Our eyes will know the tears of returnings;  
We shall see at last fade away the countries  
Of the lifeless loves.

How important to her was this decor! But then I would have been content to be with her no matter where, away from the world, on condition that I found her there completely.

Thus I was less disappointed than she in perceiving that isle that Countess Sabini had described to us as having "the shape of a lyre spread on the sea." At the approach to Mytilene we heard a phonograph from the port nasalizing, "Come *poupoule*, come *poupoule*, come." Renée, who had been waiting since dawn on the bridge, paled with horror. When we trod that dust consecrated by the sandals of Sappho and her poetesses we regained awareness of our pilgrimage, despite the modern eruptions.

I kept myself from remarking to her that at Lesbos, far from encountering the Greek type of the beautiful companions of Sappho, we saw not a single woman of that lineage, but only some handsome stevedores, fishermen and shepherds. The remainder of the population had their traits as bastardized as their language, in which Renée found no longer the accent of classic Greek.

But the little rustic hotel which received us kept an ancient simplicity, with its water pots of baked clay and its good cooking in olive oil, served by an old domestic



who had her head encircled by a band and was followed by a bald dog without age.

The nights were more beautiful than all those we had known, and from the first, what a cry of victory I had to stifle!

Receive into your orchards a feminine couple,  
Isle melodious and friendly to caresses . . .  
Amidst the Asiatic odor of heavy jasmine,  
You have not at all forgotten Sappho nor her Mistresses . . .  
Isle melodious and friendly to caresses,  
Receive in your orchards a feminine couple . . .

The next day the entire island offered itself to us like an open bed. Spread out in the sun on some wide banks of soft algae, breathing the salt air, we continued to dream on this murmuring shore of the Aegean Sea. Renée, in her poem on Mytilene, describes it:

When disposing their bodies on beds of dry algae  
The lovers fling tired and broken words,  
You mingled your odors of roses and peaches  
With the long whisperings that follow kisses . . .  
In our turn tossing words tired and broken,  
We dispose our bodies on your beds of dry algae . . .

Without the community of Orientals installed in their summer villas, we would have been able to believe ourselves in the fifth century B.C. Renée acquired some medals of that epoch, struck in the image of Sappho.

In the enchantment of this sojourn, without messenger and without other souvenir, we rented two little villas joined by the same orchard, for Renée had resolved to never leave Mytilene. She would wait for me "faithfully and without budging" if, later, I had business elsewhere.

"I have yet less business elsewhere than you," I replied imprudently, for this reminder made her contract her fine eyebrows. I then came up with an idea I knew worthy of pleasing her: "Why shouldn't we form here that school of poetry so dreamed of where those who vibrate with poetry, youth and love would come to us, such as those poets of yesterday arriving from all parts to surround Sappho?"

Renée was in fact seduced by that perspective. Installed in the larger of the two villas, she worked again on her translation of Sappho, which was nearly finished.

"But Atthis, where is she?" I said.

"Atthis is present here," she replied, taking out of her bag *Five Little Greek Dialogues* and also the manuscript of *Je me Souviens* that I had sent to her at Bayreuth. This manuscript had neighbored with her cold cream and carried the trace of it on the parchment of the cover.

"Before it gets damaged more, it is necessary that we publish it."

"I wrote it for you alone."

"Also, you see, it has not left me."

Opening my little book of *Dialogues*, I saw that she had underlined there certain passages concerning Sappho and, intrigued, I reread:

"Do you believe that she was so irresistible as they have said?"

"She was irresistible as all those who have followed their nature. She is as all those who have dared to live. She is as irresistible as Destiny itself."

"Why did she truly love only women?"



Renée Vivien

"Because only women are complex enough to attract her and fleeting enough to hold her. They alone know how to give her all the ecstasies and all the torments . . . It is in ourselves that we lose ourselves and in others that we find ourselves again. I believe her more faithful in her inconstancy than the others in their constant fidelity."

Leaning on my shoulder to read the text with me, Renée murmured in my ear:

"That Sappho there, she is you."

"That which describes one is not what one is, but that which one would wish to be."

"That which we shall become, and so that 'someone in the future will remember us.'"

"Thanks to your translation of Sappho and also to that of her poetesses, I shall write a play for which I have already determined the plot and which will destroy the myth of Phaon, for Sappho will die in it as she ought: because the most beloved of her friends will have betrayed her."

"Do not speak of betrayal nor of mourning 'in the house of the poet where mourning does not enter.'"

. . . We knew that at the hotel our mail waited for us. Avoid it? But then where spend the night? From our entry into the hotel, a parrot greeted us with a strident and mocking voice, and the concierge, taking our names, handed us our mail. Throw it in the sea without even taking cognizance of it? But then, uneasy at our silence, would they not come to disturb us? Would it not be better to open it and perhaps respond to it? A letter from Renée's friend announced her desire to visit this celebrated island and make to rendezvous shortly at

Constantinople. Renée had only time to send her a telegram to prevent her from taking the Orient Express, advising her that she was already on the return route.

Was it not more loyal to have her learn in person of Renée's intention of breaking with her than to give her the shock of such a decision in a telegram which, at any rate, would not stop her? She was of those who will not let loose or be deceived without struggle. She would arrive, therefore, and then what scenes would we have to undergo? I suggested hiding ourselves "no matter where away from the world."

"She would alert the consulate, the secret police of the entire world. Her power, like her fortune, is unlimited and even if you went away and I let her come, instead of tiring of such a life, she would clamp onto it. If she suspected anything she would install herself in your place. And that, I would not endure."

It was necessary then to leave in order to return to living in peace and to developing without fear or constraint our beautiful project. But meanwhile, from the next day, we had to resign ourselves to once again taking the boat which had brought us.

Like so many other lovers, we still had those "bad farewells from which one returns" and those recoveries exultant and without duration.

Unattached, then irresistibly attracted one toward the other only to lose each other anew, our persistent love underwent all the phases of a mortal attachment that perhaps death alone would be able to conclude.

I always loved Renée but with a vanquished love, enslaved by the circumstances that she had permitted to get the better of us:

Your clear gaze troubles and confuses me. . .  
Yes, I know it, I was wrong in many circumstances,  
And very piteously, I blush before you,  
But everywhere sorrow has hemmed me in and pursued me.  
Do not blame me anymore then! rather console me  
For having so badly lived my lamentable life.

Thanks to that "lamentable life," and to the happiness that she lacked, she has become what she has always wished to be: a great poet.

In reading, "*La Venus des Aveugles*" and "*Aux Heures des mains jointes*" I found how much these verses had strengthened. They no longer dragged "perfumed parlors" and other mawkishness. They were no longer languid but heavy with lived images, reflecting the cruelty of an existence undergone at first not without revolt, then with resignation and grandeur.

My verses have not attained calm excellence,  
I have understood it, and no one will read them ever. . .  
There remain to me the moon and near silence,  
And the lilies, and especially the woman that I loved. . .

My hands keep the odor of beautiful hair  
Let them bury me with my souvenirs, as  
They buried with queens, their jewels. . .  
I shall carry there my joy and my worry. . .

Isis, I have prepared the funeral barque  
Which they have filled with flowers spices and nard,  
And whose sail floats in folds of shrouds  
The ritual rowers are ready. . . It is growing late. . .

Increasingly appreciated in numerous milieus, Renée consented to unite her admirers and friends around her,

and we assisted at some very strange soirees where I found Colette, Moreno, the Ernest Charles, the Lesdrain and our old Professor, assiduous and rejuvenated—without our governess, who some time ago had been thanked for her diverse offices. At these reunions I was accompanied by an actress with golden eyes, brown hair and a difficult character, whose presence dissipated all suspicion for Renée's friend—who did not appear at any of these *fetes*, but had herself informed on all that happened there.

One evening when I found myself at Renée's she announced to me that her friend, who had no more uneasiness about us, had a wish to meet me and would come to dine with us. I manifested the intention to flee, but Renée begged me to stay. Her friend would interpret my refusal badly. She arrived promptly, arrayed in an evening gown that she had ordered from Laferriere, a dress which I had to admire. Since this meeting would facilitate Renée's life, I had no choice but to resign myself to it.

While waiting to find myself face to face with my rival—she whom the Princess H. disrespectfully named "the blunder"—I asked Renée why she evidently attached so much importance to questions of costume where it concerned her friend, while she accorded them so little when they concerned herself?

"I like better to leave that bore to others and to ornament only my dwelling," she had told me, adding, "I hate the fittings and have not enough personality to triumph over them. I did however wish to be party to it by ordering a dress at one of the great *couturieres*, and went, before the appointed time for the fitting, to wait in a corner of the big salon till someone came to announce my turn. Having taken along a good book to keep me company, I read it without paying attention to what was going on around me. But when the evening obliged me to lift my head toward the light that they had just lit, I closed my book and got ready to go. My saleswoman, panic-stricken, tried to stop me. I replied to her, too happy to have an excellent pretext, and despite her excuses, 'that a similar inadvertence arrived only to the most patient. . . to the best clients. . .'. Resolute, I got out the door, assuring her, with a smile, that I would never return. . ."

When that opulent person entered, her hand extended, I remarked how that blue robe covered with little islands cut into a cloth of silver, surrounded with diamonds, seemed to evoke the islands of the Aegean Sea—an allusion at which we all smiled differently. After the dinner, the Chinese butler brought Renée tea, which in place of drinking she threw with saucer, cup and spoon into the fireplace burning before us. I thought in spite of myself of her prayer: "Who then will bring me the hemlock in his hands?"

Did she throw that cup because it contained or did not contain the hemlock? Or because she judged this remedy derisory of her pain?

An instant interrupted by the violent nervousness of her gesture, we took up again a conversation on horses, whereon her friend and I had found a ground for understanding. She explained to me that a neighbor had proposed to buy from her a grey dappled horse of a breed that her stable was the only one to possess and which would match so well with one which the buyer already owned. Ought she to accept? She was hesitating, for to

sell one of her horses pained her as much as the offer flattered her. On this, the hour to withdraw having sounded, she offered to drive me back. With a glance, Renée prayed me to accept. We left then together through the Bois as far as my pavilion, where she wished to enter with me. I excused myself, making pretext of an unsupportable headache (a malady that I have never in my life felt). She could only leave with a look of reproach.

Some time after that evening—in the course of which she had tried in vain to teach me to smoke—the lady sent me a little cigarette case in enamel filled with tiny cigarettes, under the cover of which she had had engraved: "Always to the extreme, is it not, Mademoiselle?" Since I had done nothing to encourage the sending of this unusable gift—unless it was to ironically admire her dress—I supposed her on the look-out for adventure. I learned very soon after that the neighbor who had offered to buy her horse had made the bet before several persons of which she who reported the wager to me said, "Not only to possess this horse, but the owner along with." I right away advised Renée of this who, after having made her own investigation, had to recognize that the neighbor in question had won her bet. As she showed herself more indignant than pained by this affair, I tried to reason with her:

"Look, Renée, have you the right to get indignant on this point?"

"It is as if I had consented to marry a horse-dealer and that after sacrificing myself to someone so vile, this horse-dealer dared to deceive me. I will not endure this injury."

Uneasy at the excessive way in which she resented this adventure that I considered harmless, after several years of a rare fidelity on the part of her companion, I questioned our Professor, still devoted to Renée. He informed me that she had decided to break "with this banal and hypocritical life." She put this project into execution. First wrapping up her favorite knick-knack, a jade Buddha, she liquidated her bank account and took away all her money. In the train which took her to Marseilles, while looking for her ticket for the conductor, she let fall a packet of bank notes in front of the other travellers. Fearing to be followed and robbed, she let herself be "picked up" by the secretary of her friend—a friend who shortly following sent me a card, where I read this single word: "Judas."

After this debacle and this humiliation, I do not know to what excess Renée gave herself up, without so much as renouncing her plan of voyage. She escaped anew, having this time better combined her departure with some relatives who accompanied her on a world tour. After her first stop, I received in fact a word from her, informing me that she had taken to the open sea to reflect, far from all that she had loved, on the continuation that she would give to her "miserable existence." Wounded on all sides, she had already withdrawn her books from sale. Some carping critics had decided her.

The aspersions, the gross attacks, through her imagination, motivated three of her most beautiful poems: "On the Public Place," "The Pilory," and "Vanquished."

In the face of such results, I could only blame exaggerated sensibility and susceptibility. But I deplored that, by my insensitivity in precipitating the separation from her friend, I had added the drop of fatal bitterness. I feared for her health, already so damaged and which

could not tolerate the least shock or the least reproach.

At the time of a visit to her house, probably just before her voyage toward the Orient, Marcelle Tinayre saw her so:

She entered like a phantom. Already very ill, she wished to see me again. . . . Her body more fragile than formerly, revealed nothing of its contours under the very simple dress of black muslin. How she has changed, alas!

Always I shall re-see her, shadow in the shadow, recounting not her life, but her soul. She was speaking of the other world. . . . And all of a sudden, she said, "When I am so sad, so alone, so ill, I think that I would like to die Catholic. It is the sole religion where there is poetry and beauty." She added, smiling, "But no priest would permit me to keep my little Buddhist idols. . . ."

How all this contrasts with the artificial Renée whom Colette presents in *Ces Plaisirs*!

Though feeling that her despair surpassed all human aid, I wished to leave my house at Neuilly in order to wait for her return in a new place, where no bad memories had collected. I had then searched and finally found a dwelling between courtyard and garden, on rue Jacob, where I became the vestal of a little Temple of Friendship. In order to escape the moving, I rejoined that actress whom I had let depart with relief. From my arrival at Saint Petersburg, I learned that I was replaced: first by an attache of the French embassy, then by a Russian colonel. When I took the train again for the long return, an old diplomatic friend who had put me current with my misfortune brought me Voltaire's *Candide*.

Scarcely installed in my new dwelling, I learned that Renée was ill "of a malady traversed by agonizing crises and that she no longer wishes to see anyone." However, that same evening I went to ask news of her, a bouquet of violets in my hand. Half-opening the door, a butler that I had never seen replied: "Mademoiselle just died." This announcement was made in the tone of "Mademoiselle just went out." I had not the presence of mind to insist that someone put these violets near her. Then, staggering, I regained the Avenue du Bois and fainted on one of its first benches.

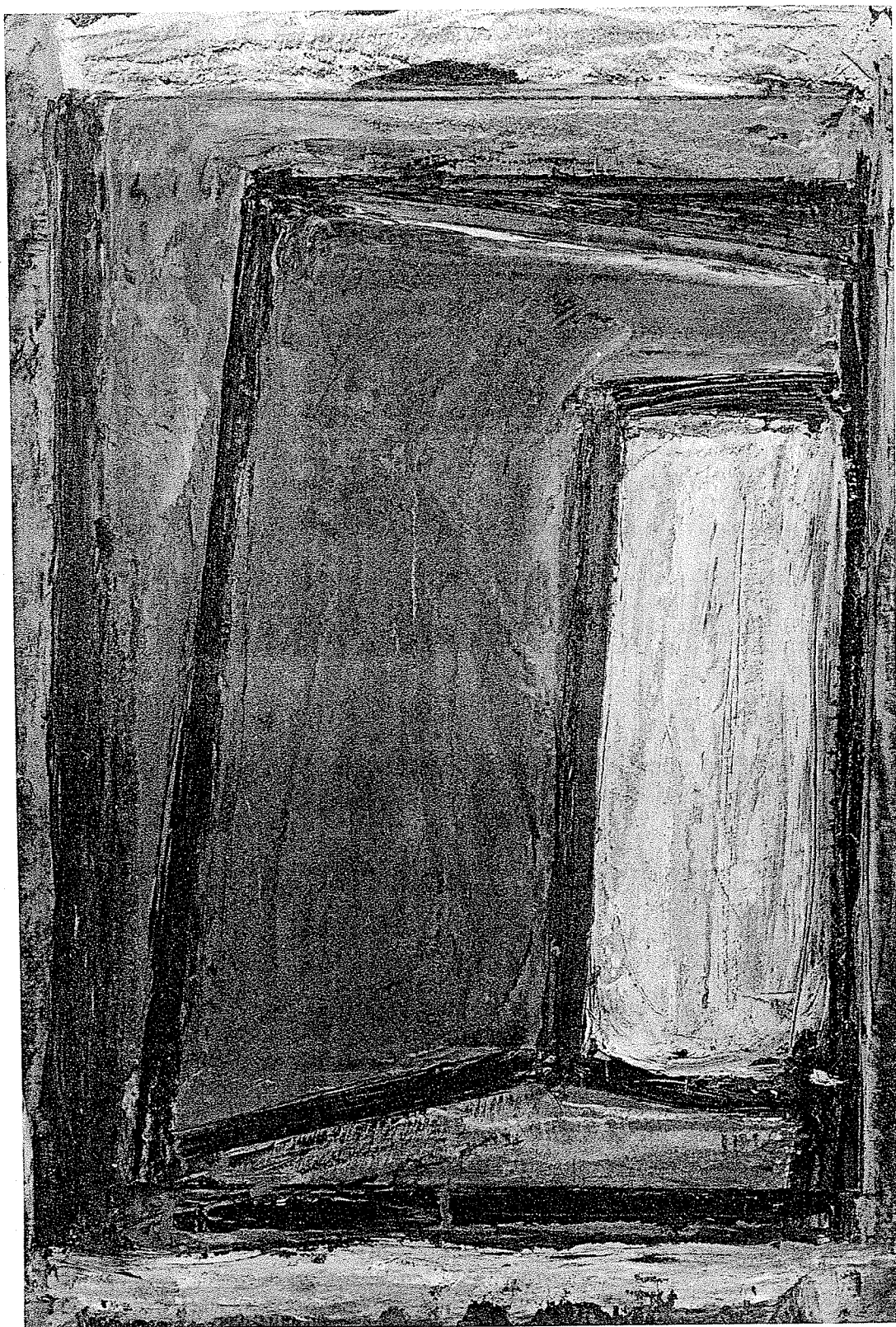
When I regained consciousness, I returned home and shut myself in my bedroom. Neither able nor wishing to see her dead, it was necessary at once to make contact again with all of her that remained to me. Like a grave robber, I took hold of the precious little box that she had given me. Its key lost, I had to open it by force. It contained so many tangible souvenirs that I felt her presence wander around me. They could then no longer prevent me from rejoining her. That this haunting not abandon me! For if I were no longer haunted, what would remain for me? Forgetfulness. But what lover, what poet, would wish it?

I replunged into all her relics: the manuscript of the poems written for me, accepting life—a vacillating life—through my tears. . . .

The day after the next, I followed her internment like a somnabulist for it was not in this tomb that I could search for her, but well elsewhere and within myself.

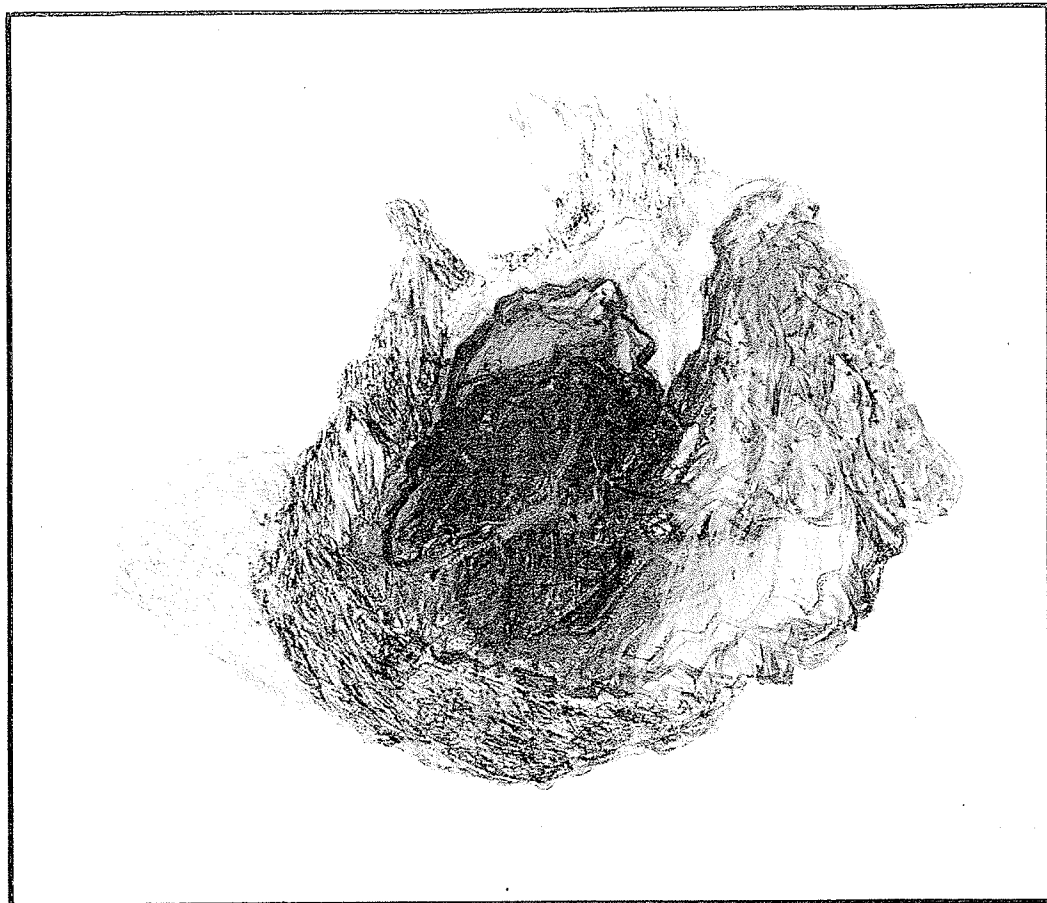
Margaret Porter is a poet and translator who wrote for years under the name "Gabrielle L'Autre." She was a founding member of *Tres Femmes*. The *Muse of the Violets*, a selection of Renee Vivien's poetry, has been translated by her and Catharine Kroger and published by Naiad Press.

# PORTFOLIO ON WORK

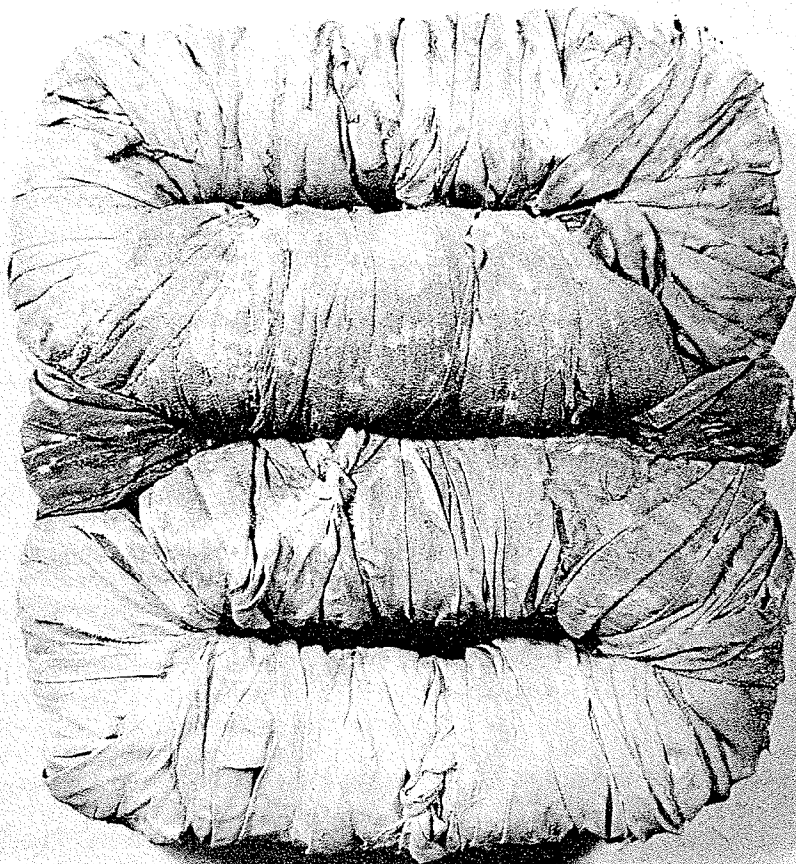


Louise Fishman. *It's Good to Have Limits*. 1977. Oil and wax on paper. 31" x 23".





Barbara Asch. *Rest Heap*. 1975. Cray-pas, colored pencil, permanent marker and charcoal pencil. 8½ x 14".



Harmony Hammond. *Conch*. 1977. Fabric, wood and acrylic paint. 13" x 12".



# How I Do It

## Cautionary Advice from a Lesbian Painter

Louise Fishman

Making paintings is one of the most illuminating and spiritual ways to focus your life. The following comments, advice, and information about my work process are addressed to lesbians who have made a decision to be painters.

### LOOKING

If you look at history you'll find that almost every school of painting and every individual artist has rediscovered artists of the past or discovered new or different aspects of a particular painting or school of painting out of the specific needs of their own work. Need determines invention. The same has to be true of our needs for past art. As my relationship to my subject matter is very personal, so is my relationship to other painting. If an aspect of paint application in a Cezanne interests me, the fact that I may not have responded to the spatial constructs or use of color is of little consequence. At another time, if those things become important to me, I will go back and look for them.

I can dislike a painting but find a small part which engages me, a quality of light or some aspect of the drawing. These are things which usually find their way into my work, often because I was approaching them in some way already. A found connection in another painting can help crystalize my thought.

It is important not to judge our own responses to paintings as inappropriate. Any place we deny the validity of our thoughts or activities is a place that will weaken our relationship to our art.

Try not to cut whole bodies of work out of your vision unless you've looked at them and studied them thoroughly: don't stop looking at El Greco because he's not Jewish, or Chardin because he's not an abstract painter or Matisse because he's not a lesbian. By all means look at Agnes Martin and Georgia O'Keefe and Eva Hesse. But don't forget Cezanne, Manet and Giotto. If good painting is what you want to do, then good painting is what you must look at. Take what you want and leave the dreck.

### DOING

My experience has been that I need to go through ritual events before my mind is clear and focused enough to work. It involves an hour or two, or sometimes a day or two; of sweeping the floor, talking on the phone (not to anyone who could be too distracting or disruptive), keeping a journal, writing a letter, sending off bills, doing some sort of exercise or meditation, sitting quietly and reading or drawing. At certain times music has been very distracting.

You have to learn what is helpful and what begins to jangle your brain.

My experience is that leisure is important to work—so

if I only have a little time to work, I try to compress some ritual loosening up into that time. Without the ritual I sabotage myself. It's important that these activities take place in the studio.

After I've gone through this process, I try to take the painting by surprise. I begin as if accidentally (although all the while I have been sneaking glances at the work). Anything in my vision can be as distracting as noise or an emotional interruption.

Some people say you must have no thoughts about other people or other things while you are working. I often have a rush of imaginary conversations with people, ideas that fill the room. But I don't stop working. They allow me to unhinge my unconscious. I don't look for those conversations, but I let them happen. As I get excited about an image forming, I am often also engaged in what seems to be a totally separate thought.

Once I've started working, the important thing is to keep myself in the studio, despite the fact that I invent lots of reasons why I must leave at that precise moment. When I've set up a day for painting, there is no pressing activity anywhere, unless I construct it on the spot.

Sometimes, leaving the studio has to happen. It's never too clear until later whether I'm coping or copping out. As I'm about to leave the studio, I'm often more able to work than before. The brain gives up hugging itself into nonmovement and I am free to work again for a while. This is often the time when I do my best work. But there are times when that little joy that happens in working disappears for weeks. And I am suffering, making what seems like endlessly boring, ugly, uninspired forms. I can't draw worth shit. Everything has become awkward. I feel like I've made a terrible mistake being a painter. And this goes on for weeks and weeks. The only thing that gets me through is a lot of complaining to a friend or my lover. I need them to encourage me into believing that I really am a painter and my troubles are temporary.

The other thing that helps is knowing from past experience that this is the time of the hardest struggle and is usually the time when I learn the most about painting. And my memory is suddenly very short, like this is the first time this has ever happened to me.

*This is the most important time to stay with the work.*

Then there's a short time when something changes, a painting or an idea evolves and there is a little relief in the air. The work is not necessarily better than what came before it, but it represents the end of that particular struggle.

At the end of a work day, I usually leave the studio abruptly. I can't seem to even clean my brushes. I sometimes forget to turn off the lights. If I've left a painting that I am particularly excited about, I know to expect

that by the next day I am often terribly disappointed by what had seemed pure genius. I often return to find a finished painting not at all finished, or a group of paintings I liked the day before suddenly repulsive to me, superficial, eclectic, simplistic.

I've learned that a quick look can be very damaging. You often see very little of a painting in a quick look, although sometimes you can find fresh clarity about a work. More often than not, I am simply cutting off myself and several day's work, denying the seriousness of that work and those thoughts.

I can be a much worse audience than anyone I can imagine. I often switch roles on myself without being aware of it. I suddenly have become a person who stepped into my studio from the street, who despises the work because she knows nothing about it and couldn't care less—a subtle bit of self-mutilation.

It's hard to paint, and it can be impossible if you don't recognize your own trickery. Handling your unconscious with firm but caring hands, fully conscious about your work process, is absolutely necessary.

### INTEGRITY

I want us to develop a sense of our strength through the integrity of work, to trust the search for honest imagery through a dialogue with the materials and through a work process devoid of shortcuts. We've got to be ready to destroy anything that comes up in our painting which is less than what finally has a degree of clarity which we as artists using our most critical thinking can recognize.

I want to caution against the dangers of purposefully and consciously setting out to make lesbian or feminist imagery or any other imagery which does not emerge honestly from the rigors of work. The chief danger as I see it lies in losing direct touch with the art, risking an involvement with a potentially superficial concern. This is not to say that the question of feminist or lesbian imagery is not a legitimate concern but rather to caution against its forced use.

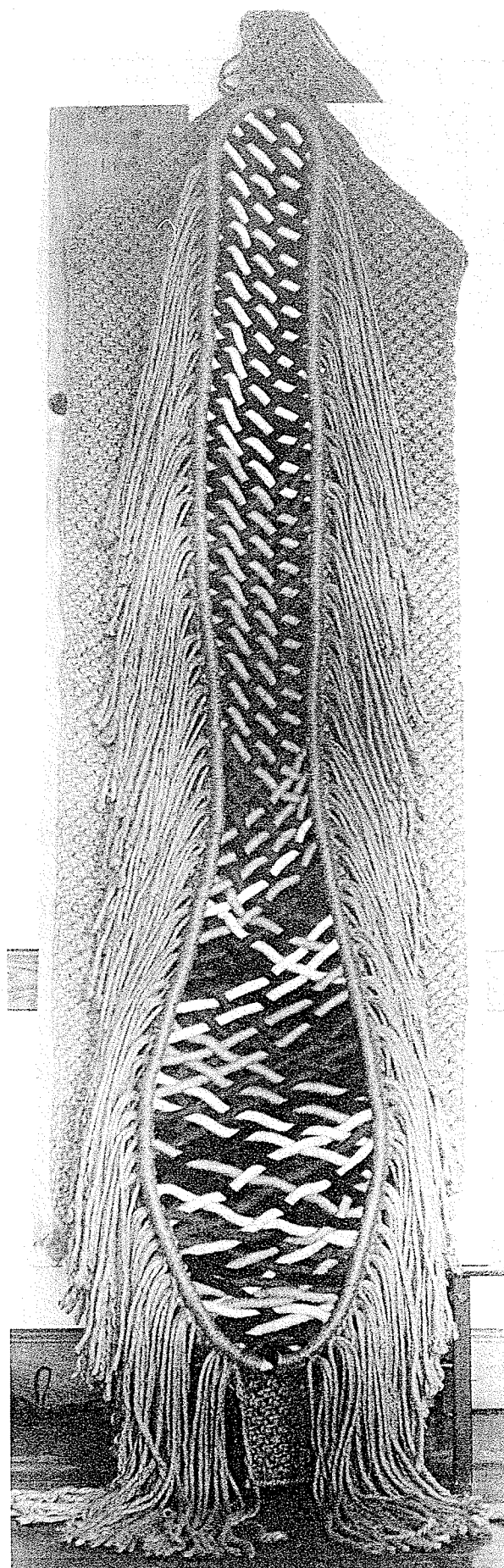
We can't allow anything unworthy to distract us from working as intensely as possible. Distraction can be in the form of pressures about imagery, methods of working or process, anything that is characterized as the "right way" or the "only way." Or it can be in the form of people who are disruptive to our work, our sanity, our clarity, our ability to believe in ourselves.

Get the creeps out of your head and out of your studio.

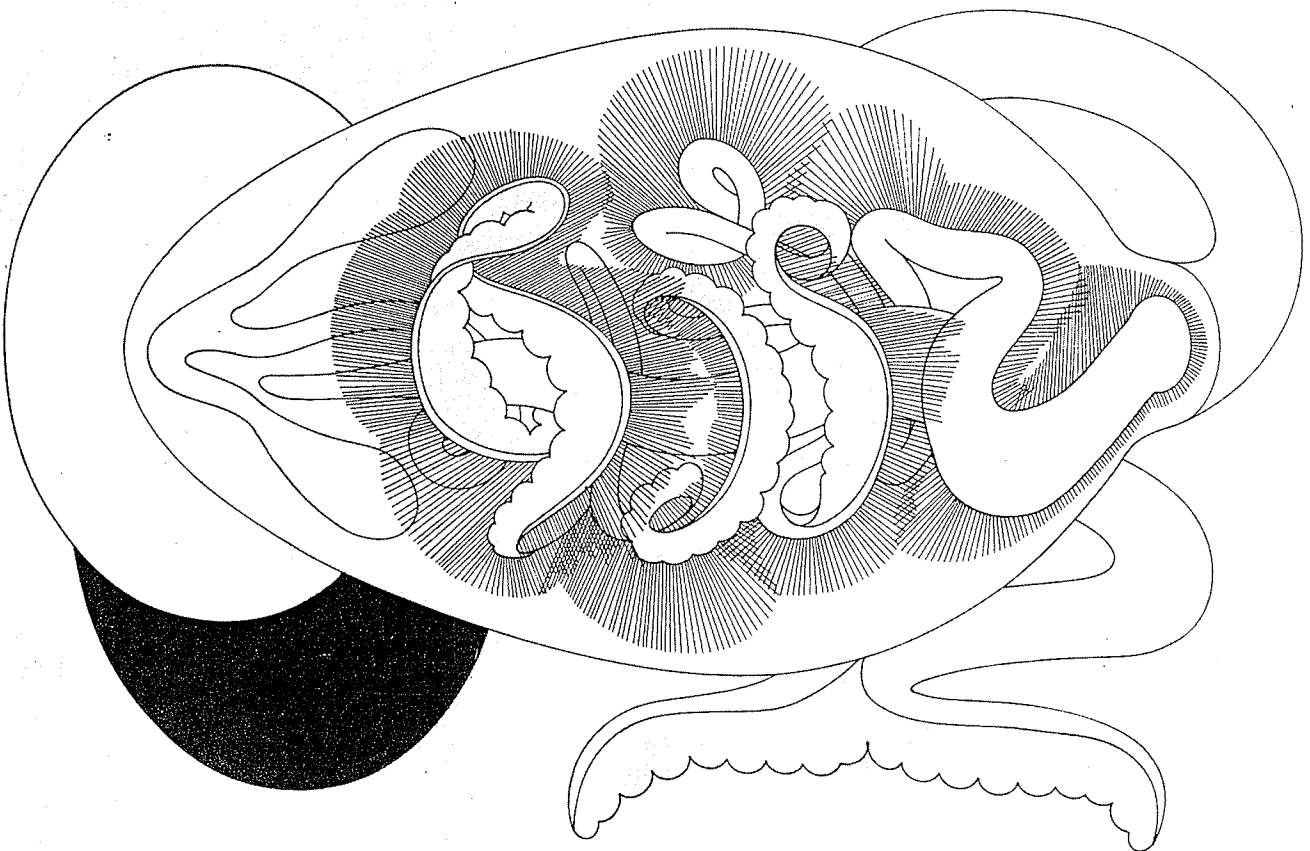
We must be willing to trust our own impulses about what the source of our work is—and where to go with it. It takes long periods of time, perhaps years, to understand which habits are constructive, to discover what an honest source of inspiration is and to trust that source of inspiration.

Be clear about people's motives in visiting your studio, or wanting to discuss your work. Only let in people that you trust, unless there is something you want from them (a dealer, etc.). Know what you want from them and weigh that against the disruption of your time, your privacy, your space. These things are to be cherished and protected. It's important to be conscious of anything that may build up inside you that could make you feel bad about yourself. Ultimately that takes a masochistic turn and the work suffers.

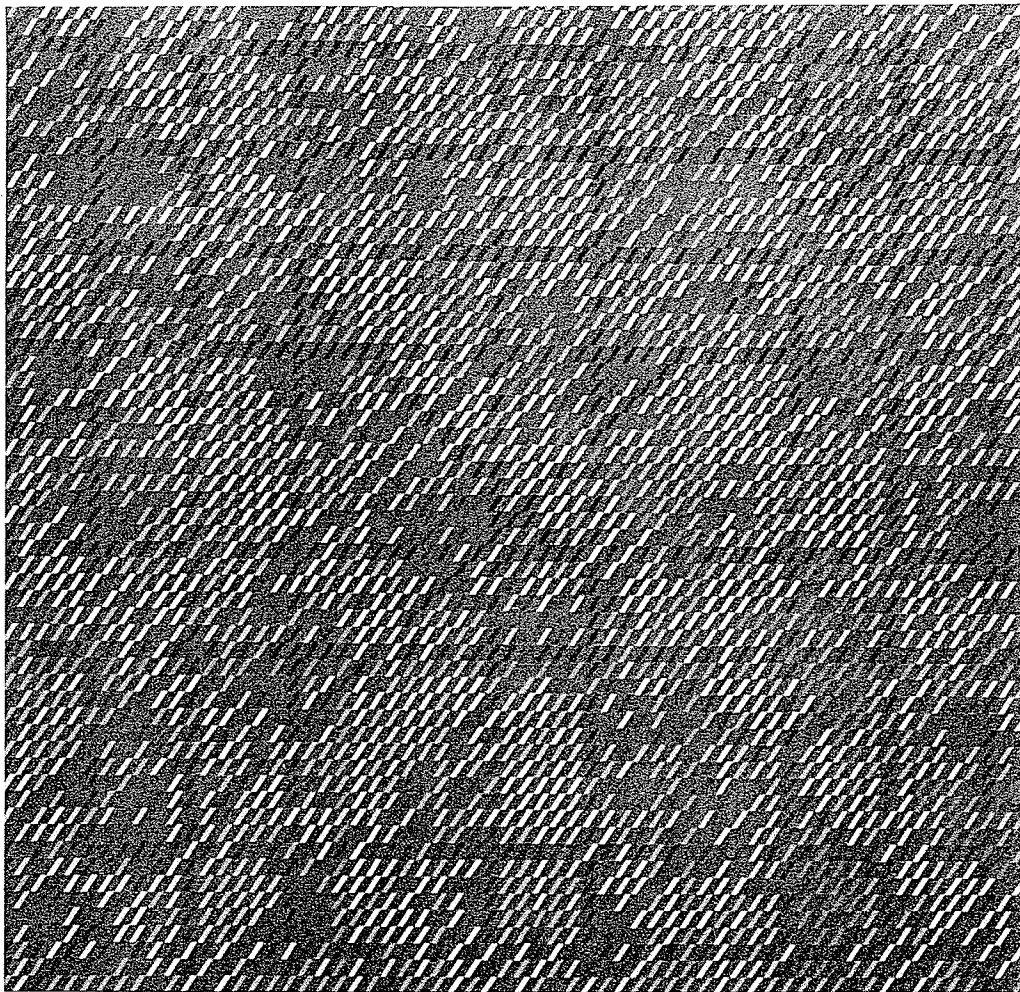
Care for yourself. Through that caring you can make a commitment to your work.



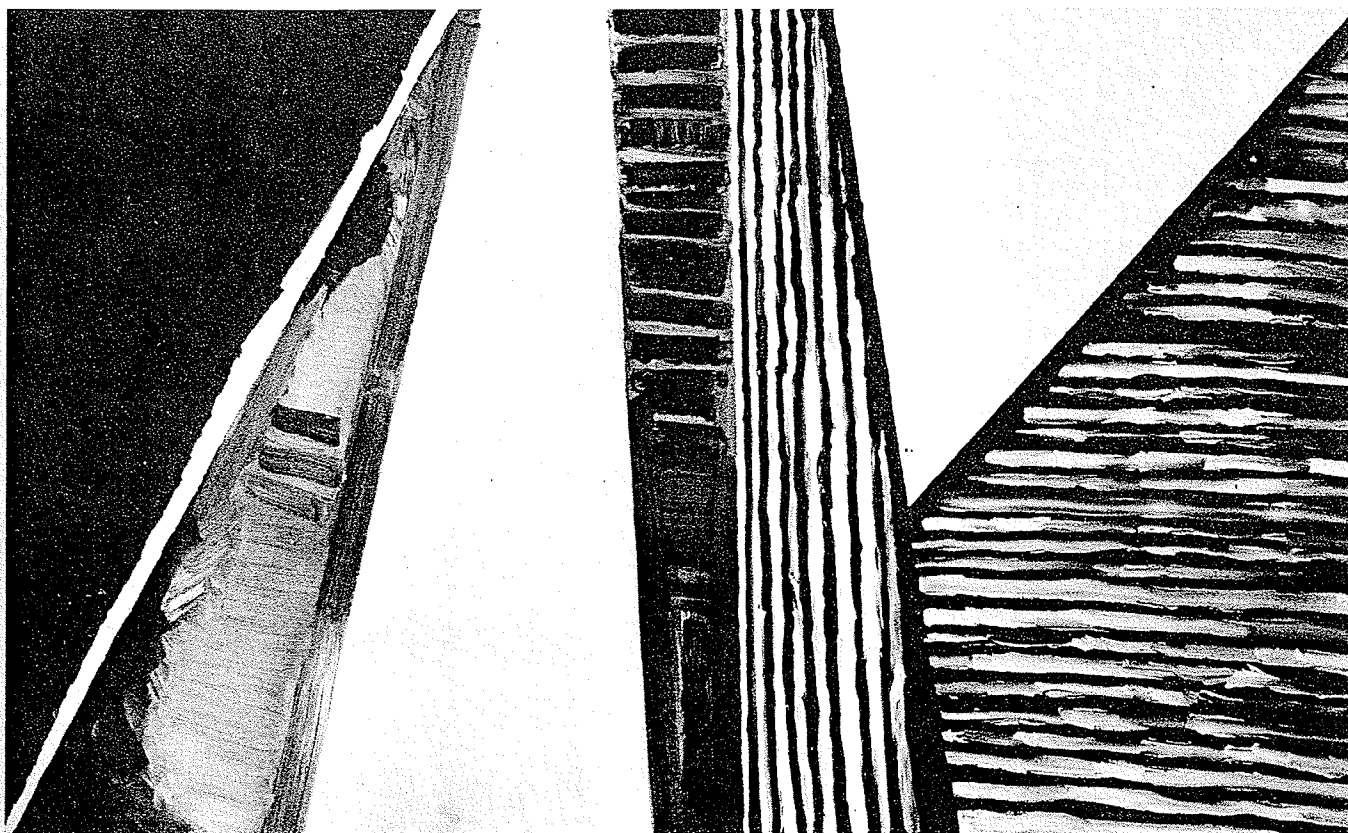
Leora Stewart. *Wall Form*. 1973. Natural jute, wool in greys. 11' x 3' x 12".



Sarah Whitworth. *Anatomy of Bonellia Viridis*. 1974. Ink and watercolor on paper. 29" x 23".



Gloria Klein. *Untitled*. 1977. Acrylic on canvas. 60" x 62".



Dona Nelson. *Untitled*. 1977. Oil on canvas. 24" x 40".

# Architectural Icon

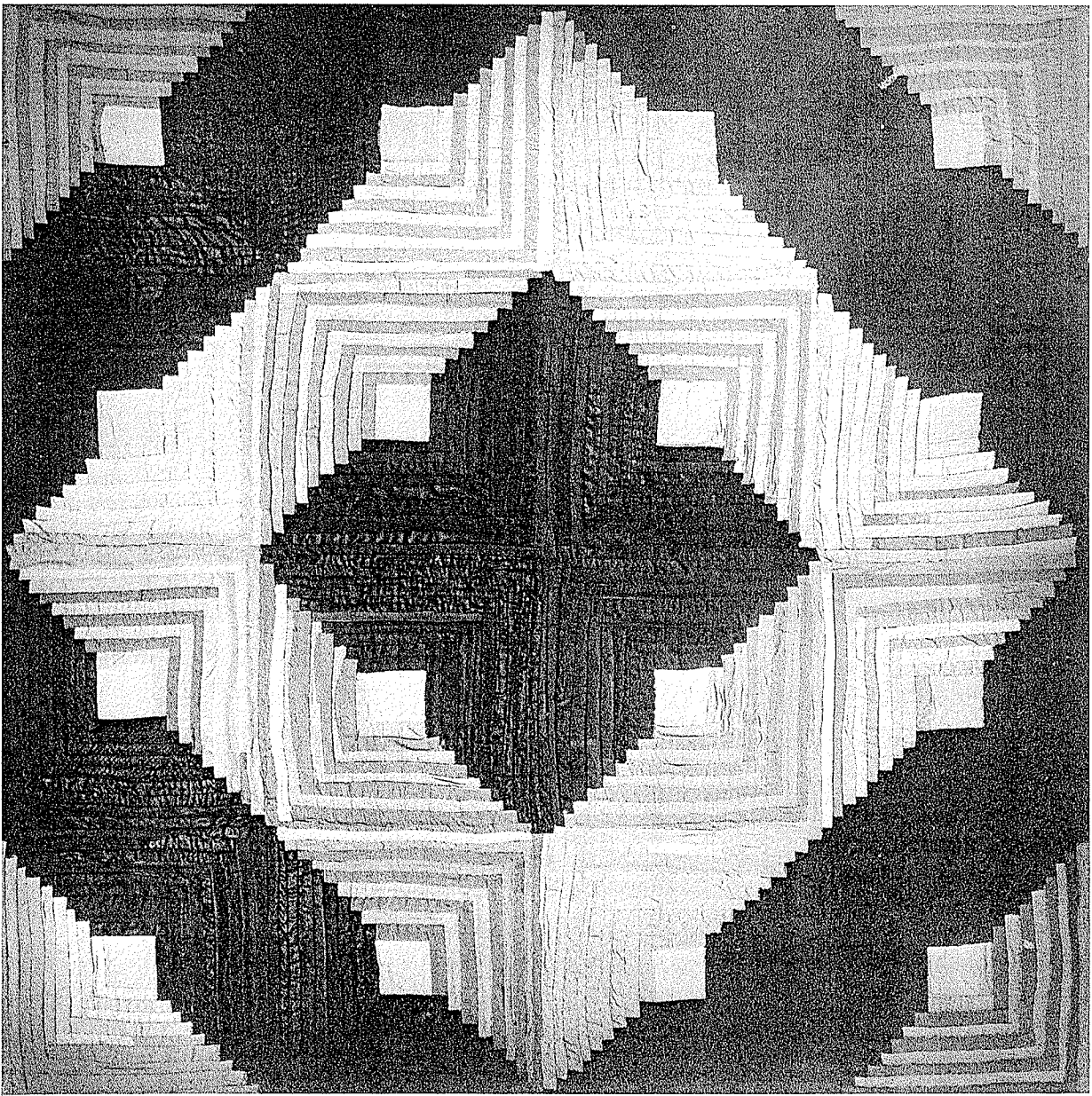
## The Shrine The Votive The Gesture

Ann Wilson

"The Icon, then, is not only an aesthetical entity. It is the result of the faith and of the prayer. It is the life. The saving truth is not communicated by the word alone, but by the fact of awakening vital forces of life through the presentation of beauty. The icon carries with it the love of this beauty, and the beauty of this love." (Byzantine Bible)

The idea is simple. Gesture gives grace, space gives grace, image gives grace, sound gives grace. Icons give grace. Vital energy, electric impulse, passes through grace to the beholder. Behold, to be held. This vital energy is present in echoes, ancient shrines, whose purpose is now missing, whisper. Walls built to enact transformations which poets feel when they are impelled—what music casts over the mind. Spirits that exalt and glorify, spirits usually rare and capricious should be permanently fixed, working miracles perpetually for every one. Spatial humanism—humanity at magnitude—value in light and shadow—true perspective. That art whose attempt is delineation of the divine mirror. That subtlety which is more fine because it abjures extravagance or fantasy. Our need for votive architecture never died. Time changes the abstract order motivated by our need for intellectual security with which to summon inspiration. Inspiration sustains the purpose of living. The demands of each epoch's external pressures on the biological frames encasing our spirits press from us an architecture of expedience like wine from grapes. "Every epoch is a sphinx which plunges into the abyss as soon as its problem is solved." Roman walled gardens yielded a further retreat within Romanesque cloisters. Roses bloom in secret spaces. Votive—fragment—a fragment of gesture—stones of a wall running through an empty plain to the rock mountain. Ridge—snow—votive—gesture. The gesture of respect. A marble seat for the priestess set in the center of the front circle of the amphitheater. Stone fall—blue sky—empty space. A bench encircled the outer walls of a building and clay votive objects lay on it. Hieroglyphs of information—puzzle pieces—spaces out of the architecture of gestures. Stones laid for liturgy—before the column came the gesture of the column. On the trail of imprints, of gestures left long ago in air. A sound, the corner of the stairway, the lock on a gate, flowers in the ruins. The way the foot fits in a stone path which loses outline in vanished direction. Cows within temple precincts, wandered from India. A roof given way to sky illuminates mosaic squares, formal elements—natural elements—the elements. When you look at the sphere of our sun is it conceived differently if you stand in the exact center of a square? If you separate candles into a red glass, a blue glass, and a yellow glass, does your perception give the retina a different neural message for each color? Are we always composing processional spaces to approach our intuition? When you walk between columns toward the center do you begin to feel the effect of your progress toward the conclusion? Is geometry perhaps the repository of ancient sacrificial gesture? The Chinese, who have had a long time to think, have over a hundred names for differing shades of blue. Where do colors come from? Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? Liturgies are a logical order for progressions toward their fullest possible human form—*mundra*. This is an invocation. A statement of presence within defined votive space. A rejoicing. A statement of belief. A blessing and a recessional. The perfect logic of respect. Biotechnology. The body as media, simplifying and clarifying ways to receive natural energies. Images which travel from era to era and are electric. Human needs are warmed by that same ancient fire. The walls we create are the containers and guardians of our continued relation to the light source. Electric affinities. "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: deals out that being indoors each one dwells."





Ann Wilson. *Ohio Relic Quilt*. 1974. Fabric, elmer's glue, acrylic and house paint. 5 1/2' x 5 1/2'.

# Growing Up A Painter

## Dona Nelson

Present-day abstract painting is almost totally ruled by painting conventions: grids, stripes, panels, fields of all-over activity, images suspended in the middle of the canvas, etc. Why paint abstractly at all if our paintings are bound by more rigid organizing conventions than the portrait, landscape and still life ever were? A mountain is a complicated form. As Cezanne illustrated, it can inspire paintings endlessly, but after one has seen a few squares, a painting composed of squares, no matter how interesting the surface, color and space, suffers from a kind of familiarity. The *whole* of the painting ceases to compel active looking, and some of the adventure that painting can achieve is inevitably lost.

It seems to me that so-called woman's imagery (symmetrical images, grids, etc.) has more to do with oppression than anything else—keeping us in our places. It has to do with *not* creating.

Likewise, the complacent New York art world does not inspire creation either as it is primarily oriented toward "good" and "bad" which are usually relative to what we've known about before, and even these designations tend to be based on shallow "looks" (painterly, hard-edge, slightly figurative, non-figurative) rather than on any substantial thinking about painting.

It is very difficult, even painful, to examine all aspects of your painting and try to be fully conscious of the origins of everything that is there, to try to create the *whole* thing and make a truly personal art, but only then does one fully realize how adventuresome the *attempt* to make paintings is.

The inherent genius of paint and canvas is this: out of the simultaneity of thoughts, having no absolute form, constantly impinged upon by the emotions, a hard physical thing arises, different from all those thoughts.

I think abstract painting as a whole has gotten too simple, too far from the way the mind works. There seems to be such an overwhelming need to *organize*, achieve a kind of finality. Agnes Martin said, "This painting I like because you can get in there and rest." The thing that seems most important to me is to escape the organizing conventions that allow us to rest and rob our paintings of the life that is in us.

Painters have attempted to expand abstract painting by introducing design (so-called pattern painting), mathematical illustration (e.g. Robert Mangold), and general wall decoration (Stella's recent reliefs). Painting has lasted so long because of the flexible, expressive nature of its possibilities—color, surface, mark, flat-emanating space. The shift in attention from these concerns to compositional concerns (e.g. Stella's reliefs—a shape here, a shape there, a decorated surface here, a decorated surface there) leads away from the particular things

painting can do, away from painting itself.

Abstract painting, far from being at its end, has just begun, but at its beginning, it was already proclaimed as a kind of all time culmination—a reflection of the goal-oriented, history-oriented, death-oriented, twentieth century obsession with progression, as if all the supposed links between things were more noteworthy than the things.

I understand "reductive" (please excuse the word) painting to be painting that attempts a very specific, resonant single space. The reductive impulse that has been important in abstract painting for the last twenty years has made for some very fine painting: Newman, Stella's black paintings, Marden's and Agnes Martin's etc. This is the painting that I have loved best and thought most about because it is here that I have found a sense of *place*. I have admired and sought the reality that a painting can possess. I don't like the term "abstract" as it implies something second-rate to all the vivid realities of this world. The esthetic of grids and monochromatic planes is a highly artificial one. People who are not knowledgeable about modern painting will often make fun of, for instance, a single monochromatic panel, saying, "Is this what all the fuss is about? It's like the story of the emperor with no clothes." Artists hate this old saw, and yet it is said so often that I have begun to think about it. Human life and human beings are very complicated. It would seem natural that art might be more interesting and more relevant to more people if it in some way reflected this complexity. Although Cezanne is often talked about in relation to modern painting, particularly in relation to Marden, the thing that strikes me most when I look at Cezanne is his incredible complexity. In terms of space alone, he often allowed many different kinds of space within the same painting, many subtle shifts. Cezanne's paintings are both deliberate and tentative, fixed and fluid, reflecting a whole mind rather than a single thought, a mind that could entertain grand themes, contradictions, and incomplete musings.

Recently, I have been looking a lot at Pollock and DeKooning. I like the way Pollock was able to be very detailed and very big at the same time—everything happens at the same moment, in the present, on the surface. DeKooning's life-long *attitudes* toward art-making seem to me to be exceptionally healthy. He wrote, "Art should *not* have to be a certain way." He also said that the notion of having to will one thing "made him sick."

In my own work, everything is entwined with something else—the near altered by my memory of the far, a dark day, a Manet gray.

New art comes about through an individual imagination simultaneously working upon past painting and the

specifics of a work in progress. So long as a person has seen other paintings, what she does will in some way be affected by what she has seen. If the effect is a rejection of male painting, than it has made its mark upon our paintings as surely as any other way. Mainly, I want to be conscious of *how* I have been affected. I do not mind learning from past painting so long as I am fully conscious of the nature of that knowledge.

Great painters, Manet and Cezanne consistently, others sporadically, are distinguished by a particular kind of inventive ability—the actual paint has yielded to their imaginations, thoughts, feelings. They have created new kinds of space. Painting space is not cartoon flatness or depth perspective, rather it is the thoroughly ambiguous space of a dream, the emotionally and physically inextricable, a flatness equivalent to unfamiliar spaces. In this realization, all great painting is abstract and expressive in the best and most subtle sense of the words.

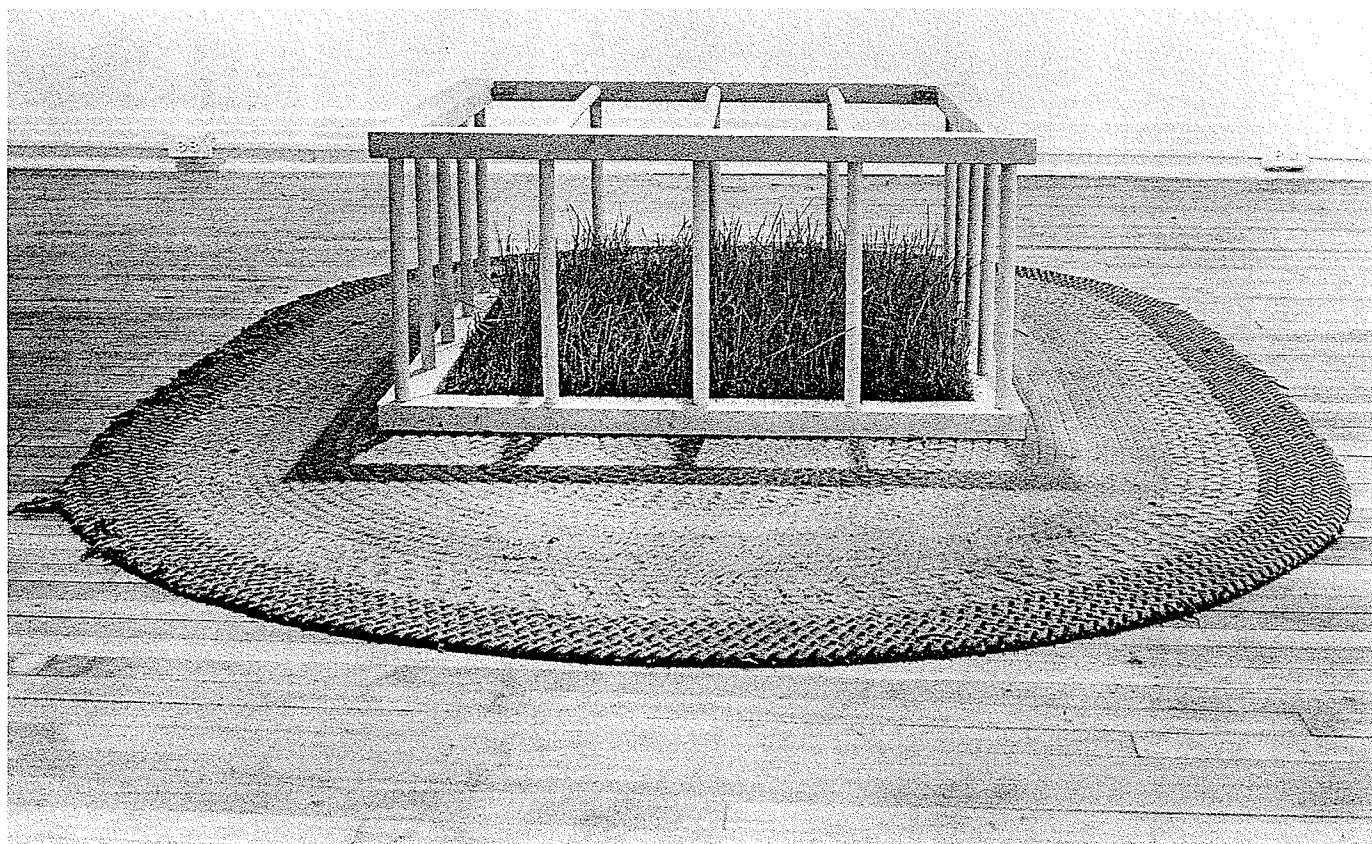
A painting's reality cannot be experienced through descriptions or photographs, and an artist who enjoys high visibility often suffers a kind of backwards invisibility. The art is shown, bought, talked about, written about and seems to become a known factor, with either a good reputation or a bad one, which doesn't need to be looked at anymore (an illusion).

Looking at a painting is not like watching television; it is active rather than passive, a kind of claiming, satisfying just by itself. Anyone can "see"; but no one can see, casual viewer or museum curator, who will not let go of ego, judgments and categories long enough to penetrate a painting and allow it to penetrate them.

Since painting is limited to an irreproducible thing, it has never been and will never be an art form to be enjoyed by huge numbers of people. In terms of their commercial allocations, paintings are luxury items, but such a designation doesn't say anything about their living nature as art. It just refers to the money swirl that goes on about them.

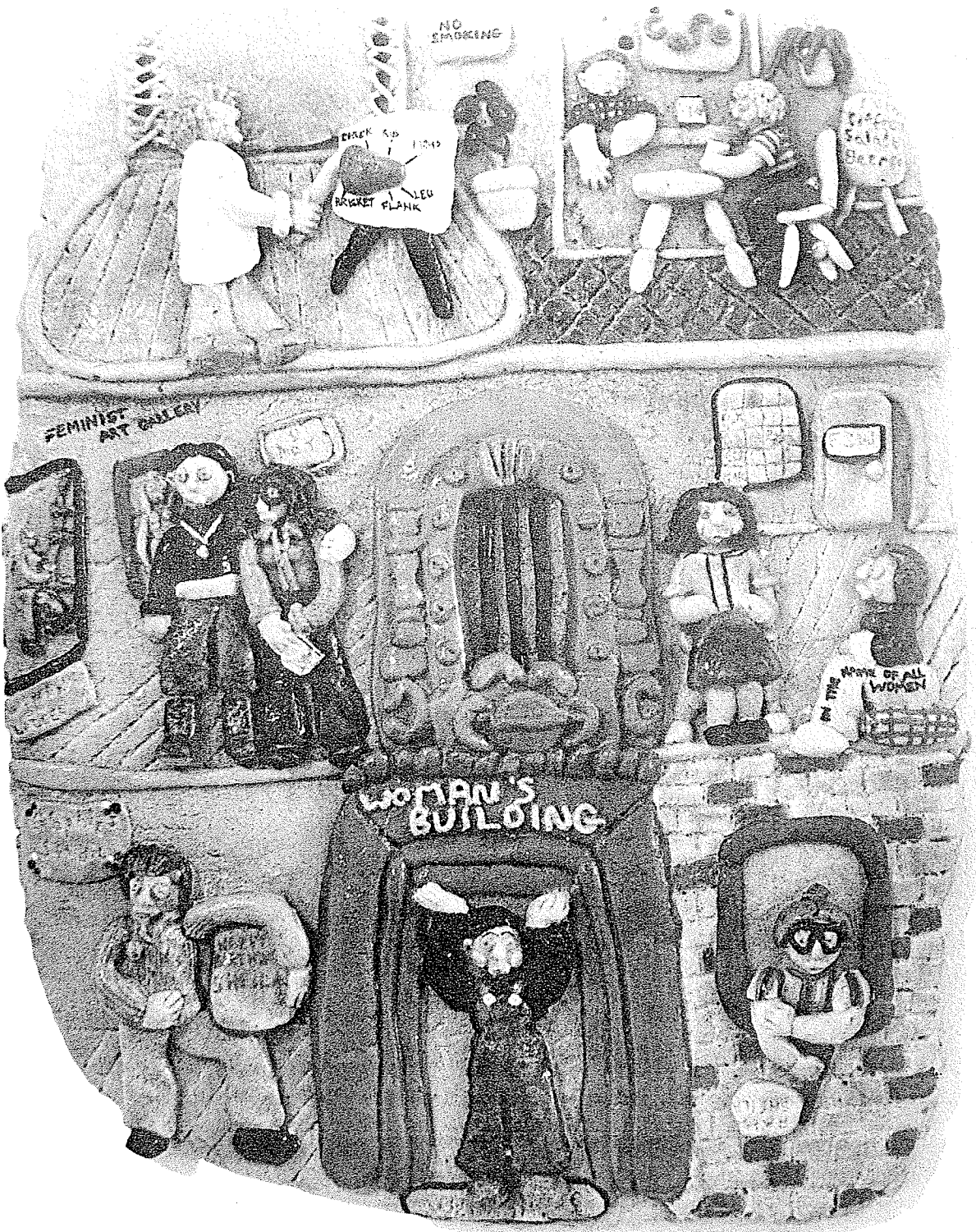
Painting, like nature, and unlike politics and religion, is not moralistic. In painting as in music, poetry and dance, an individual has the opportunity of getting out from under the economic, sociological, psychological and political descriptions that are constantly foisted upon her from childhood by parents, education, peers, and society in general. In art, the real complexity and specificity of an experienced life can shine through. Far from being a luxury item, either making art or experiencing art should be the prerogative of every person on this earth.

When I was still in school—about ten years ago—someone said to me, in tones of awe and admiration, "Do you know that Stella knows what his painting is going to be like for the next ten years?" I didn't know if this was true, but I do know that even at that time I got a very uneasy feeling. Authority, control, clarity may be useful attributes for a businessman, but it seems to me that they are, more often than not, destructive and limiting to an artist. Anyone that knows me knows that I am as authoritative and verbal as any man, but recently I feel weary of myself like I long ago felt weary of most men. My painting is dark to me. I don't know "where it's going." I hope it takes me someplace where I have never been before.

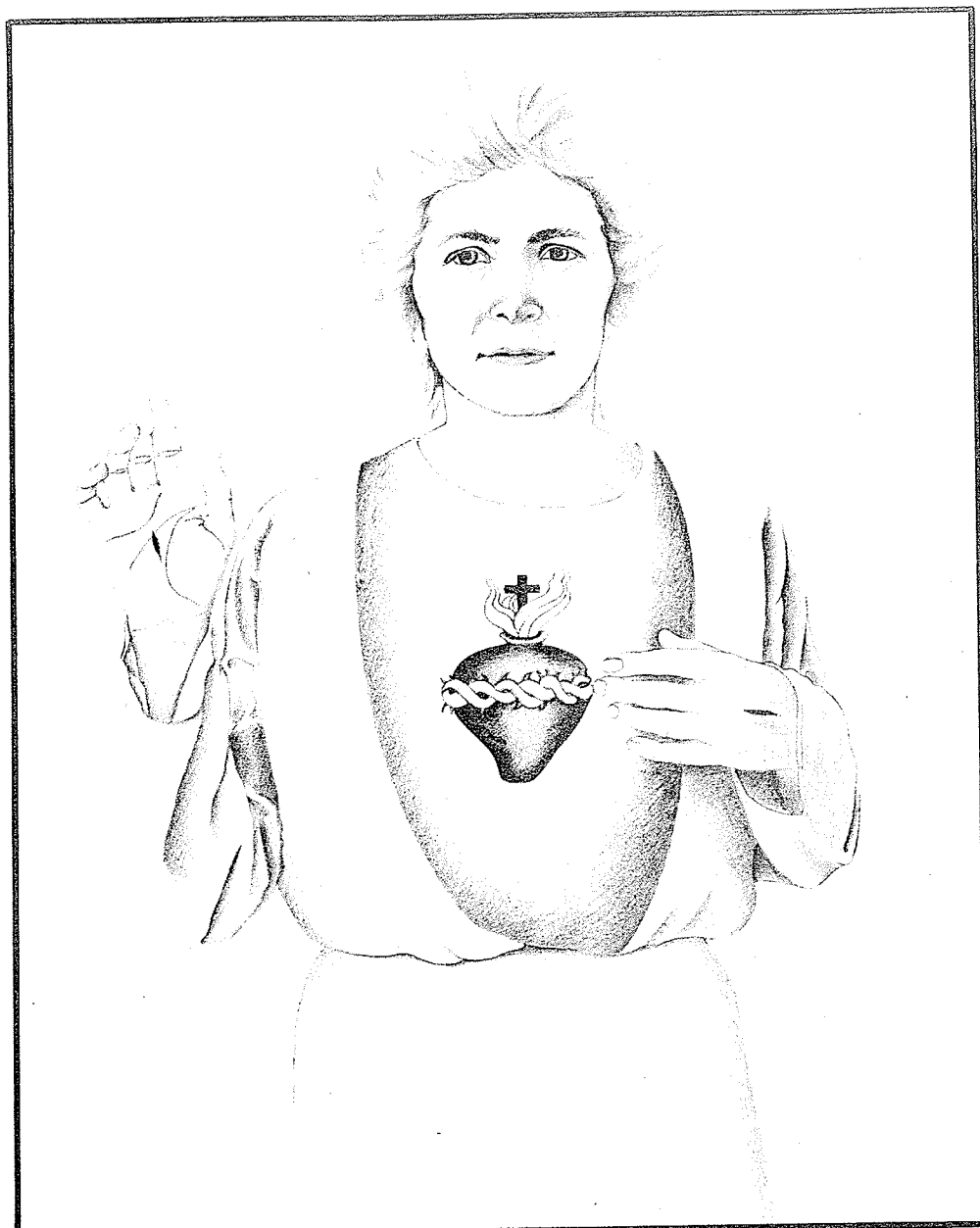


Kate Millet. *Domestic Scene*. 1976. Mixed media. Rug is 4' x 6'.





Nancy Fried. *The Woman's Building*. n.d. Flour, salt, water, acrylic and watercolors.



Dara Robinson. *Resurrection—Self-Portrait as the Sacred Heart*. n.d.

*Louise Fishman is a painter and lives in New York.*

*Barbara Asch is a painter and an art therapist. She lives in New York City and Bridgehampton.*

*Harmony Hammond is a painter who lives in New York.*

*Leora Stewart is a fiber artist who lives and works in New York City.*

*Sara Whitworth is a painter and writer who lives in Chelsea.*

*Gloria Klein is a native New Yorker who expresses the chaos, structure and excitement of her life in her paintings. She is currently coordinating "10 Downtown: 10 Years."*

*Dona Nelson is a painter who lives in New York City.*

*Ann Wilson, sometimes known as Rose Etta Stone, was last seen drowning in bureaucratic papers. She is currently directing an environmental art theater work, "Butler's Lives of the Saints," a renaissance work involving opera, drama, painting, theater and thirty artists.*

*Kate Millet is a sculptor and author. Her latest book is Sita.*

*Nancy Fried is a feminist lesbian artist who portrays the intimate everyday lesbian lifestyle in her artwork. She is a member of the Feminist Studio Workshop and the Natalie Barney Lesbian Art Project Collective. She is currently preparing for her second one-woman show at the Los Angeles Woman's Building in the fall.*

*Dara Robinson is interested, vitally interested, in the culture women are creating, but her greatest thrill is contributing to the creation of a lesbian culture. "I am a militant lesbian feminist activist."*



# Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff

Paula Becker 1876-1907

Clara Westhoff 1878-1954

*became friends at Worpswede, an artists' colony near Bremen, Germany, summer 1899. In January 1900, they spent a half-year together in Paris, where Paula painted and Clara studied sculpture with Rodin. In August they returned to Worpswede, and spent the next winter together in Berlin. In 1901, Clara married the poet Rainer Maria Rilke; soon after, Paula married the painter Otto Modersohn. She died in a hemorrhage after childbirth, murmuring, What a pity!*

The autumn feels slowed-down,  
summer still holds on here, even the light  
seems to last longer than it should  
or maybe I'm using it to the thin edge.  
The moon rolls in the air. I didn't want this child.  
You're the only one I've told.  
I want a child maybe, someday, but not now.  
Otto has a calm, complacent way  
of following me with his eyes, as if to say  
Soon you'll have your hands full!  
And yes, I will; this child will be mine,  
not his, the failures, if I fail  
will be all mine. We're not good, Clara,  
at learning to prevent these things,  
and once we have a child, it is ours.  
But lately, I feel beyond Otto or anyone.  
I know now the kind of work I have to do.  
It takes such energy! I have the feeling I'm  
moving somewhere, patiently, impatiently,  
in my loneliness. I'm looking everywhere in nature  
for new forms, old forms in new places,  
the planes of an antique mouth, let's say, among the leaves.  
I know and do not know  
what I am searching for.  
Remember those months in the studio together,  
you up to your strong forearms in wet clay,  
I trying to make something of the strange impressions  
assailing me—the Japanese  
flowers and birds on silk, the drunks  
sheltering in the Louvre, the river-light,  
those faces. . . Did we know exactly  
why we were there? Paris unnerved you,  
you found it too much, yet you went on  
with your work. . . and later we met there again,  
both married then, and I thought you and Rilke  
both seemed unnerved. I felt a kind of joylessness  
between you. Of course he and I  
have had our difficulties. Maybe I was jealous  
of him, to begin with, taking you from me,  
maybe I married Otto to fill up  
my loneliness for you.  
Rainer, of course, *knows* more than Otto knows,  
he believes in women. But he feeds on us,  
like all of them. His whole life, his art  
is protected by women. Which of us could say that?  
Which of us, Clara, hasn't had to take that leap  
out beyond our being women  
to save our work? or is it to save ourselves?

Marriage is lonelier than solitude.  
Do you know: I was dreaming I had died  
giving birth to the child.  
I couldn't paint or speak or even move.  
My child—I think—survived me. But what was funny  
in the dream was, Rainer had written my requiem—  
a long, beautiful poem, and calling me his friend.  
I was *your* friend  
but in the dream you didn't say a word.  
In the dream his poem was like a letter.  
to someone who has no right  
to be there but must be treated gently, like a guest  
who comes on the wrong day. Clara, why don't I dream of you?  
That photo of the two of us—I have it still,  
you and I looking hard into each other  
and my painting behind us. How we used to work  
side by side! And how I've worked since then  
trying to create according to our plan  
that we'd bring, against all odds, our full power  
to every subject. Hold back nothing  
because we were women. Clara, our strength still lies  
in the things we used to talk about:  
how life and death take one another's hands,  
the struggle for truth, our old pledge against guilt.  
And now I feel dawn and the coming day.  
I love waking in my studio, seeing my pictures  
come alive in the light. Sometimes I feel  
it is myself that kicks inside me,  
myself I must give suck to, love. . .  
I wish we could have done this for each other  
all our lives, but we can't. . .  
They say a pregnant woman  
dreams of her own death. But life and death  
take one another's hands. Clara, I feel so full  
of work, the life I see ahead, and love  
for you, who of all people  
however badly I say this  
will hear all I say and cannot say.

Adrienne Rich

Several phrases in this poem are drawn from actual diaries and letters of Paula Modersohn-Becker, as translated from the German by Liselotte Erlanger. (No published edition in English of these extraordinary writings yet exists.) Rilke did, in fact, write a Requiem for Modersohn-Becker. Perhaps this poem is my answer to his.

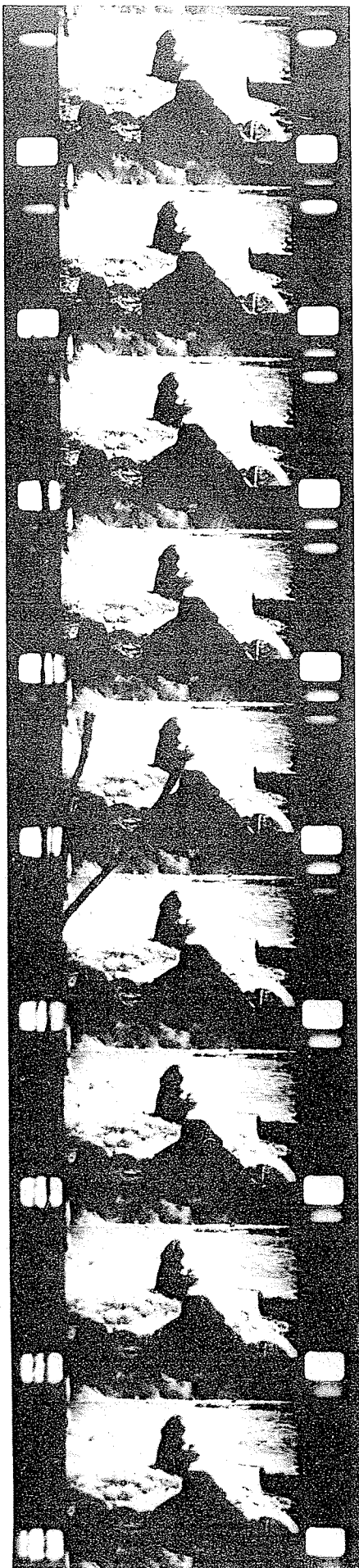
This poem will be included in a forthcoming book to be entitled *The Dream of a Common Language*.



Carol Bloom. *Untitled.*



Carol Bloom. *Untitled.*  
Carol Bloom is a thirty-four year old native New Yorker who makes her living teaching high school. She's been doing photography for ten years.



## USE OF TIME

The structure in my films existed before I began talking about it. The structure is intuitive in conception. Analysis, abstraction, and my talking about it comes later. That is why my films are not formalist; that is, they do not strictly adhere to an *a priori* rule of form, but instead, spring from my intuitive gut experiences and so are phenomenological. The form is directly determined by the content. A lot of words. My films begin in what I call "feeling images," an inseparable unity of emotion and image of thought/idea/image and internal bodily states of excitement.

I am going to talk about time and imaging in some of my films: how they were created (what gave rise to the image language that became screen language) and how they differ from each other in time structure and image content. I will talk about the following films: *I WAS/I AM* (1973) which combines real time and fantasy time; "X" (1974) which is a ritual naming film based on subverted time; *Menses* (1974) a satire of the Walt Disney type movie ritual of menstruation; and *Dyketactics*, which can be seen as erotic time.

Film is a projection of still pictures of images or non-images (color or non-color) usually at the standard projection time of twenty-four of these still pictures per second. So from the beginning, film is both illusion (the illusion of movement from the rapid succession of image or non-image) and "reality" (the progression of the celluloid strip through the projection system). Within this context the experience of time in *I WAS/I AM* is my attempt to combine "real" time and fantasy time. I believe these usually separated experiences are part of the same life experience. If we fantasize, as we all do, if we remember past and project future during the continual present, as we all do, we are experiencing real time which is composed of all this simultaneous imaging.

Tempo, or the ratio of these projected stills, is another variable the filmmaker constructs with the continuous present of the projection. In this first 16mm film I attempted to build film scores of increasing and decreasing intensities by image chain links of additions or deletions. The central image of the chain is two image frames, the neighboring image is four, the central image repeated is three, the neighbor, eight, and so on in a time-increasing construction within the film.

*I WAS/I AM* was inspired and influenced by the great work of the mother of American poetic film, *Meshes in the Afternoon*, by Maya Deren. Deren writes of simultaneous time as a unique and poetic experiencing in her small but comprehensive booklet, *An Anagram of Art and Ideas*. Deren's elucidation of the poetic film which

# IN WOMEN'S CINEMA

## BARBARA HAMMER

makes use of simultaneous time is excellent and the basis of much of my own work. I will give you her words on the poetic film. It is a transcription of that state of being where the intention or "intensification is carried out not by action but by the illumination of that moment." The illumination of the moment (the continuous present) means the film's construct is vertical rather than horizontal. It is a poetic construct of developing moments each one held together by an emotion or meaning they have in common rather than logical action. I talk about these images as feeling-images, one calls or recalls another, until a great pyramid is built of a particular feeling or an elucidation of the multi-dimensions of that feeling, that emotion state. I think Deren and I are talking about the same thing. She says, it is "the logic of central emotion or idea that attracts to itself disparate images which contain the central core they have in common. Film is essentially a montage and therefore by nature a poetic medium."

We have a long and continuing tradition of great women poets. It surprises me then that women's cinema in many cases continues and copies the linear, narrative left brain dramatization of the novel, of the Hollywood and international entertainment film. However, there are women filmmakers who work in the short, lyric genre of illuminated moments: Gunvor Nelson, Barbara Linkevitch, and Joyce Wieland, to mention a few.

This leads us into another area, the scientific study of the different hemispheric centers of the brain. The left is rational, linear, analytical, and related to speech and words. The right is the center of artistic, musical and spatial perception and I might add, the hemisphere that allows us to experience simultaneous and continuous time. Feminist phenomenology or gut level experiencing stems from right brain use: the nonverbal knowledge of intuition, feeling and imaging. I suggest that the right hemisphere is dominant in forming the image clusters in my films and in my dreams. In *Psychosynthesis* (1975) I use the holistic right brain for dream imagery and time structure. Some of the images are from deep sleep dreams, others from waking dreams or dream-like states of consciousness.

Presently I am attempting to understand the time structure of dreams and I think I can only talk here about my dreams. The time in my dreams seems to be time that can jump back and forth into past and future, time that is not chronologically sequential but emotionally, or symbolically sequential, much like the illuminated moments held together by emotional integrity. One scene may seem totally unrelated to another but in

fact is emotionally related and so time-related if we can enlarge the word 'time' to encompass a feeling image that connects with other feeling images and is a particular way of experiencing the world.

A recent dream I had is about this lecture as well as about teaching me a new characteristic of dreams: that I am able to control part of my dream by changing it much like the control an editor has at her editing bench.

The Gertrude Stein dream:

*The long run to learn a foreign language from Gertrude Stein.*

*I was aware of every detail and it seemed to be taking forever.*

*So that I willfully changed the dream at one point in the seemingly endless run*

*To the classroom where I was late, had missed the last six lessons and knew*

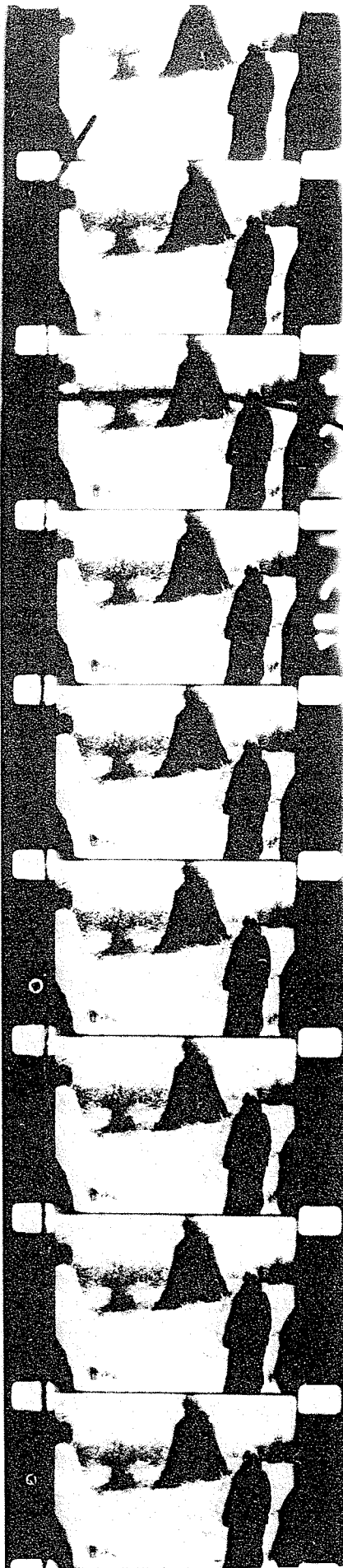
*I wouldn't be able to pass the test.*

*Once at class we put all the words with similarities together*

*Each group was a different crayon color.*

*We learned the words by understanding distances creates by differences.*

Analyzing this dream is a lot like analyzing the time structure of film. I was in a dream state of clocktime that went on and on in the running to the classroom. The time was extended like when I jog and notice the details of the surrounding bushes, rocks, sand patterns, leaves, trash, whatever one passes on the track or on the street during a run. Detail upon detail. How long is running time? As long as the details. Eventually detail notation became tedium and I switched purposefully to the classroom, to the emotional state from exasperation and frustration with clocktime to a new scene entirely but linked to the other by the emotional time of anxiety and frustration. I was late. I had missed a lot (probably because I was so busy running and noting the outer, external world) and would fail the test of understanding. But once there in the new environment I became interested in the class lesson and my anxiety disappeared with my receptive attitude. I learned about ordering and structuring of words. I think the emotional time is a recognition of the integration of my left brain analytic thinking process with the feeling or right brain state of the dream. I am engrossed, happy, content in absorbing structural information about linear words. (In emotional time one might say time had stopped because of concentration.) This dream then moved from a frustration with detailed chronological time to a blissful integration of intellectual inspiration that seemed chronologically timeless.



Gertrude Stein continually and continuously writes about time, although she was not fond of film as she knew it:

I myself never go to the cinema or hardly ever practically never and the cinema has never read my work or hardly ever. The fact remains that there is the same impulse to solve the problem of time in relation to emotion and the relation of the scene to the emotion of the audience in the one case as in the other.

In Stein's class we learned to differentiate by association which is much like Maya Deren writing that it is the "logic of central emotion that attracts disparate images." In Stein's class we learned the words by the distances between them.

When one thinks of Stein's paragraphs where the same words are used in different order from sentence to sentence the words have a dissimilar spatial relationship to one another, a different distance, a different time sequence. So that all the words colored orange in one paragraph—all the same word—will have a unique meaning depending on the spatial/time distance they have from one another, simply, their place in the sentence changes their meaning. Distance, a system of measurement, in this case is a way of looking at language as a construction of time notation.

Stein again: "I said in *Lucy Church Amiably* that women and children change; I said if men have not changed, women and children have." I love to think of her writing in the continuous present directly in the outdoors being surrounded by the thing one is writing about at the time one is writing (editing the emotion surrounded by celluloid images of emotional association, being in the emotional time one is when one is editing). She wrote *Lucy Church Amiably* wholly to the sound of streams and waterfalls. I find that exciting, inspiring, revolutionary. Living, fluid, changing energy streams provoke and carry the words of caretaker woman, our mother Stein. She wrote every day. Her present was in writing. She waited for the moment when she would be full of readiness to write and what she wrote came out of fullness as an overflowing. A waterfall.

"X" is a ritualistic self-naming film. Ritualistic because naming is a repetitive process. We say over and over again who we are. The more self-understanding the more inclusive our definition is. As we keep changing our naming changes. We are new, continually giving birth to ourselves, so newly recognized awarenesses of who we are give impetus for new naming forms be it film, a personal documentary of the evolving self, or the self-portraits of the painter that continue throughout her painting life.

In "X" the naming of myself at a low point of depression was a form of rebirthing myself. Everything had fallen away. I wrote in my journal several declarative statements: This is my exhibitionism; This is my anger; This is my pain; This is my transportation; These are the children I'm happy not to have... and with each sentence I wrote the image that came to be the emotional signifier of the dry word. The chain break for exhibitionism because of my interest in film and my revolt against the male film establishment (Anthony Quinn breaking the fake chain in *La Strada*); the tear crying pain for the great Dryer's *Jeanne D'Arc* where pain filled the screaming screen near future time but my time was my sister's time and it was her wash on the line, her dish



towels and baby diapers, my pain-her pain-our pain.

"X" is a metronome of subverted time: time that is rhythmically alternated, recapitulated, varied, retrogressed. A baroque ritualistic naming chant that pounds again and again with image and sound making a self-determined statement out of despair. I will, I will, I will be. In spite of, in spite of, in spite of. By the perception of repetitions the viewer makes film intelligible. Repetitions are identifiable signs of style, clues as to the way an artist sees, and even if the repetitions are convoluted and ambiguous with superimpositions and layers of filmic texture they are by their very nature based in time and represent the unique manner the artist plays and replays her/his visual present/past experience/memory imagery.

Ritual time is universal time, repeated time, sequential time. Time of repeated gestures of the same significance. Time that seems to stand still as when one embraces a lover. There are rituals of initiation, transcendence, rites of passage. There are emotional rituals of openness and trust, vows, the rituals of relationships.

*Menses* is a ritual too, a home-made one, but it is also a satire on the Walt Disney film which became for many of us the junior high school puberty rite of our culture, the time when we were shuttled off as prepubescent adolescent girls to the closed-off walks of a hushed and secret closet auditorium. In the films shown then it was lace and daisies and muted whispers that surrounded the flow. What a farce. To carry a rag between one's legs, to stuff cotton cylinders into a private perfect body opening, to say it was a secret and precious and distinguishing. The lie. The lie. The lie. The lie of the screen, the lie of Modess Incorporated propaganda. I'd make my own film combating from the other side. It was no fun. It was discomfort. It was womanly and so was talking about it and screaming and playing and boasting. It was no secret. It could be filmed in consumer heartland, Payless Drugstore; it could be exhibitionist and free and wild—nude women dripping blood in Tilden Park high over the intellectual playground of the state, Cal Berkeley. It could be collective, each woman planning her own interpretation of rage, chagrin, humor, pathos, bathos—whatever menses meant to her within the overall satiric and painted nature of film. And I could shape and form and find the unifier, the pubic triangle and the egg, red. And each of the women was a part of me and it was not necessary that my particular body and face be screen present. They acted out for me, for them, the personal expression of one bodily female function. The color Brecht, the humor Barbara.

One aspect of the ritual of relationship is the ritual of sexual activity or erotic time. Sexual activity is repeated

gestures, repeated responses. Surely there are the wonderful and innovative creations, experiments with each new lover and findings between old lovers if we are lucky, but there is the overform of sameness and the universality of time when the universe stops and we are centered in the still circle; as Eliot said, that's where the dance is. *Dyketactics* is erotic time; it is not made with the Freudian traditional belief that the sublimation of erotic energy into creative psychological pursuits is the only hope of a civilized society. This belief is apparently proven wrong by the secularly repressive, capitalistic, obsessive, chauvinistically oppressive world we know. *Dyketactics* is the free and joyful expression of erotic energy directly. Art is directly sexual; sex is directly art. The commercial length erotic time was edited kinesiologically; by that I mean the images which are feeling images at the gut level were edited to touch: literally images of touching, eating, cleaning, washing, digging, climbing, stroking, licking, bathing, butting, hugging, yum. Textural editing. Feel it. Feels good. A lesbian commercial.

Finally, women's time for me, for Stein, for Maya Deren, or Mary Daly writing in a recent issue of *Quest*, a *Feminist Quarterly*, is in the continual present:

Feminist consciousness is experienced by a significant number of women as ontological becoming, that is, being. This process requires existential courage to be and to see, which is both revolutionary and revelatory, revealing our participation in ultimate reality as Verb, as intransitive verb.

Time for women is making, becoming, being. My films when projected exist in the present as continuous time, simultaneous time as living time as when I saw the celluloid strip in the editing bench in the flickering light of the moviescope. They are still present for me because they evoke the change we feminist women experience in our continual becoming in the difficult and oppressive society that environs us.

Barbara Hammer. Film strips from *The Great Goddess*.

*This article was originally presented as a lecture at the San Francisco Art Institute, July 30, 1975.*

*Barbara Hammer has been working in the poetic personal genre film since 1968. She has completed fifteen films in 16mm, and distributes them herself through Goddess Films, P.O. Box 2446, Berkeley, California 94703.*

# Joy Through Strength in the Bardo

## Sally George

This morning I saw a beautiful woman walking behind me. I was going to work through a neighborhood of factories and garages, tired, slumping cold and heavy inside my mouse-colored coat; my mouse-colored hair creeping greasily down my face. And a bulky man leaning drunk against a car spoke unintelligibly to the air behind me, prophesying a vision; and he spoke the truth, for I turned and there she was. She passed and we walked single-file, our paths amazingly the same through the grimy ruined streets. I watched her walk, watched the exact angle of street appear and disappear each time one leg swung past the other.

The place I have worked for a month now is huge, brightly lit; a whole floor in a factory building. My boss lives there, in this one gigantic room. The kitchen is in one corner and the toilet is behind a low wall—like this morning on the street you hear events without seeing them. The place is sparsely furnished, each object carefully selected: stark German appliances, glass tables, a meat rack to hang coats on. The forks don't look like forks and the knives are triangular, but they cut clean. Two others work here, and the boss leaves; I know most about the work; am I in charge? I make coffee several times; when I ask them, they join me. The slower typist reads the paper, makes mistakes, leaves early; the better one sits up straight, seldom speaks, needs nothing. No sandwiches, no jokes. She is a poet.

Later, with my daughter, I go to the library and we look in the encyclopedia to learn that there are 500 species of frogs and the Pony Express began in 1860. There is a look-it-up club at school and she joined to wear their button; a man comes once a week to hear their answers. I am sure he will turn out to be an encyclopedia salesman. I am horrible to my daughter, grow impatient when she cannot find the right place in the encyclopedia; I have alphabetized too much today.

At home, the puppy will not eat his dinner. I have a box of cookies, my daughter has canned and frozen gook. We plan her Halloween costume. Someone calls, a woman I know slightly. Are you better? she says. You sounded so upset last time we talked. I'm not sure, but I think she said the same thing last time she called. Yes, I'm better, I said. I'm used to it now.

My work is making an index out of thousands of single cards, each with one name or fact written on it. It is like a jigsaw, like knitting, like having a baby. Every bit falls in place, and each place must be precisely right or it will be defective. We have been trying to bring it forth for two months now. It progresses, but it never gets finished. I think this all happened because I stopped reading *The Castle* in the middle; if I finished it we could finish the index, but I am under a spell and can do nothing. My life is promised to begin when this is over; I am to eat right and be kind to my daughter—perhaps I'll find a lover, go to the country, or take up volleyball.

After dinner I go back to work; my boss is hung over. Was it his turn to collapse, though, or mine? We will miss our new deadline, he says; he means the one I thought was real. We can't keep up this pace, he said. Him saying it means we can slow down. My saying it means I'm being difficult. He smiles when I disappoint him; perhaps he thinks I'm going to turn into an encyclopedia salesman.

He walks me to the subway, we look out for rats. The drunks are gone now, it's too cold. Our index is about Hitler, these streets are not real. I live continuously in the bunker, see only the dog Blondi and the picture of Frederick the Great. There are speeches on Social Darwinism. Defeatism is severely punished in the army. When my new life starts, I am going to live it with great precision.

*Sally George is a writer who lives in Brooklyn. She has published short stories in Ms., Redbook, North American Review and Christopher Street. She is presently interested in market research.*

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# Definitions

## Susan Sherman

1

I think its coming close to death  
that does it

both others  
& your own  
that magnifies the values  
begins the definitions

This morning

mild at last  
after weeks of chill  
Streets heavy with water  
People stepping  
cautiously  
hardly knowing where  
to place their feet  
so accustomed to barriers  
of salt & ice

My mind resembles those winter streets  
grey

with sludge  
The snow cover melted  
The sidewalks washed of unfamiliar  
glare

2

After all she said  
What difference does it make  
That's the reason I never write  
hardly speak of what is me

I begin to answer glibly stop  
Held myself in identical fear  
My own touch tentative  
almost an excuse

like making love to someone  
for the first time  
or the third (which is always harder)  
once you begin to know experience  
another

the tension of your hair brown  
streaked with grey  
the lines of  
your face like wires rushing through  
my hands the pressures of your past  
your forehead your knees

3

Warm outside the steam  
continues forced by habit  
I open the window throw the  
oracle trace the heat  
The heart thinks constantly it says  
One constant then the heart Another  
the drawing back

Four o'clock  
two hours till dawn Nightmare

image your face  
surrounded by strangers  
Beloved you turn

away  
Sweat mixes with blue flowered sheets  
The constant fear  
To push out  
finally cautiously tentatively  
and find

an empty place

4

Death brings us close to it  
Death itself

forgetting  
And we the living  
wanting to remember  
not wishing to be forgotten  
separated  
from what we hold most near

I hold you for a moment lose you  
watch you disappear

I hold you  
for a lifetime lose you

the next year the next morning  
the next minute the next breath

5

You tell me  
What can I say to that  
young woman 18 years  
of age

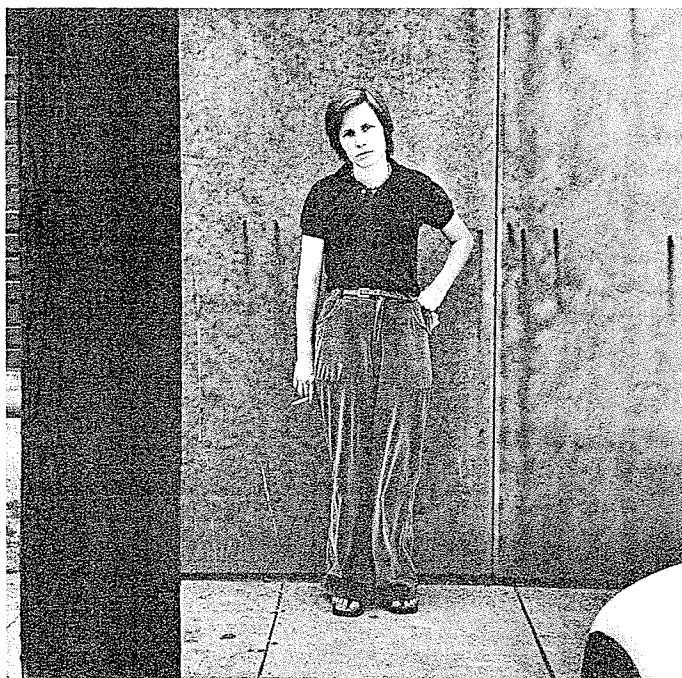
That I at 38 must once more lay aside  
all sense of definition order  
Must once more carefully measure  
the accumulation of my years  
Or should I say  
her question can be answered  
in specific needs others  
and her own

But she's asking  
more than that We both know  
what she means

The only real difference being death  
The one who stops the heart

*Susan Sherman's two books of poetry, With Anger/With Love and Women Poems Love Poems, are available through Out and Out Books. She is currently working on a prose book about creativity and social change.*

# REALITY/FANTASY — PORTRAYALS



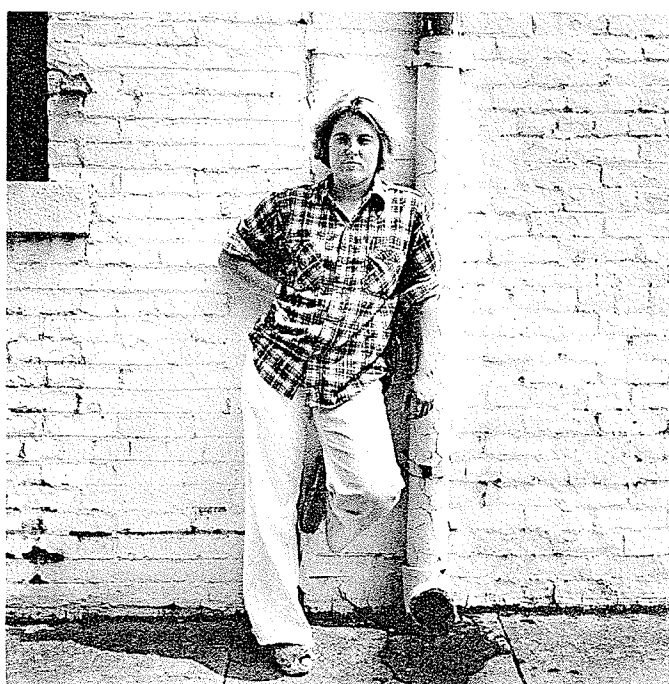
Bia Lowe Reality Portrait



Lily Tomlin Reality Portrait



Earlene Mills Reality Portrait



Terry Platt Reality Portrait

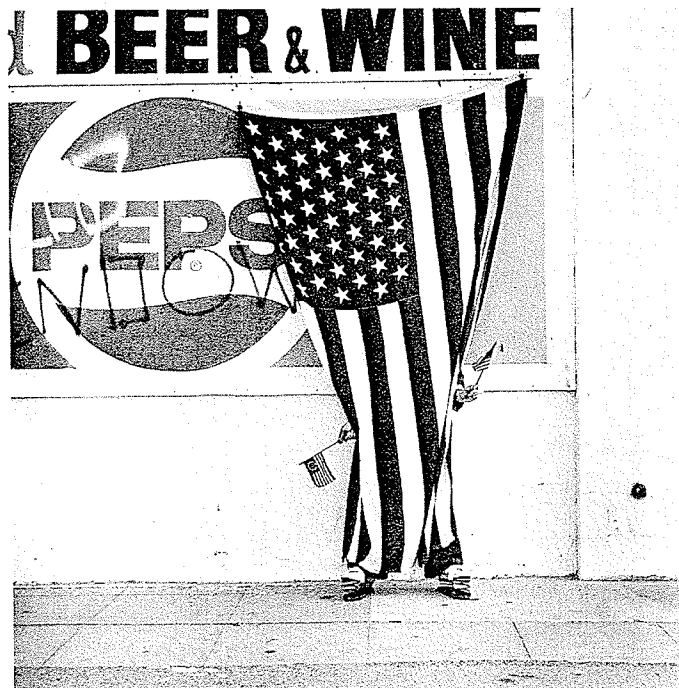
# E.K. WALLER



Diane Devine Fantasy Portrait



Kathleen Burg Fantasy Portrait



Diane Salah Fantasy Portrait

E.K. Waller is an artist living in Los Angeles. "My present work is about feminist community and deals primarily with the fantasies of feminist women. I am a member of a group of feminist artists, which is my support group, and with whom I recently exhibited at the Woman's Building in L.A."



# LESBIANISM AS A LIBERATING FORCE

ELSA GIDLOW

Is lesbianism liberating for the artist? My own experience suggests that it is. When at an early age I recognized the need to voice the poetry seething in me I observed my mother and all the women I knew of, living and dead, and saw that their lives were both destructive of women's independence and dignity and inimical to the pursuit of an art. Along with this realization I was not attracted to men (though as yet not fully aware of their collective roles as oppressors). I knew nothing of a lesbian way of life but my own needs and observations were guiding me in that direction.

When at the age of eighteen I learned of the Greek poet, Sappho, and her way of life I discovered what is now (inadequately) called "a role model." Seeking out all I could of her way of life and her times I found intimation of alternatives for women of talent and spirit not hinted at for those born where I was growing up. Not that my life could in any way resemble hers. She had every social and economic advantage. I had none. Penniless and with no formal education, no schooling after fourteen nor preparation for any sort of career, I had to accept long hours of wage-slave menial office labor while trying to salvage space and time for creative work.

Nevertheless, the sense of inner freedom, of broadened emotional horizons, was revelation. I could be, was in my heart, though a wage-slave, an independent woman responsible to and for myself. I am aware that young women today, sixty years later, may not see it that way, some hoping for more freedom in marriage, others compromising with or feeling compelled to lean on welfare. But I think that any job is preferable to either spirit-cramping indignity. I wrote a poem bidding farewell to the socially prescribed roles and in it was the line, "The wide world is to know." Security (how false is usually that promise) was scorned; the sense of adventure predominant. However brash it may seem, I feel that this sense of adventure is necessary to the artist.

Adventure always has been assumed to be the prerogative of men. On the other hand the life of housewife-mother is totally mapped. You can see to the end of it in middle age, menopause, loneliness. The role of non-heterosexual artist (in my case, poet) in the early twenties was unexplored territory. You launched yourself into the unknown. Who can say that is not exhilarating? It did not occur to me that there could be any greater difficulties attached to my preference for women as lovers than I already faced. The economic and educational lack of advantages aside, I was already at a disadvantage as a woman daring what was (still is) regarded as a male world. Being an aspiring poet compounded it:

even male poets were expected to starve in garrets. Already critical of the whole course of bourgeois society and its inequities, I did not fit in on that level either—nor do I wish to. Being lesbian could not make me more of an outsider. As the saying goes, "You may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb." Whatever the hazards, the attendant liberation from conformity was stimulating, compelling one to think for oneself.

If I was little inclined to consider the aloneness ahead, the heartache and hardship, that soon became plain. There was no supporting feminist movement. I hoped to find comrades on the way, what I called "my people"; but it was taking a long time. I have had other women today say, "You had your gift, your art." Yes. That was what I lived for, in the face of every setback. But having talent is not unique. I believe that creativity is inherent in all humans as is the impulse in plants and trees to produce blossoms and fruit according to their kind and that it is a necessary concomitant of growth.

Generally, the domestic way is not compatible with the way of the artist. Nor, as a rule, with other spiritual and intellectual dedications. Can it be coincidental that most priesthoods, East and West, have called for celibacy? Sappho wrote: "I am forever virgin." And let us never forget that "virgin" in the original definition meant, not absence of erotic experience, but independence. For women, independence from men and marriage, hence domesticity. (A virgin forest is an unexploited one.) Even the Virgin Mary in the Catholic church is not depicted as domestic. She has a priestly role. As does every artist.

Does it become plain why lesbianism is liberating for the woman, for the artist in her? Or for those women born with or who cultivate what I call a lesbian personality? As I see it, that personality manifests itself in independence of spirit, in willingness to take responsibility for oneself, to think for oneself, not to take "authorities" and their dictum on trust. It usually includes erotic attraction to women, although we know there have been many women of lesbian personality who never had sexual relations with one another. Even where an erotic relationship exists the sensually sexual may be far from predominant. What is strongly a part of the lesbian personality is loyalty to and love of other women. And every lesbian personality I have knowledge of is in some way creative. To my mind this is because she is freed or has freed herself from the external and internal dominance of the male and so ignored or rejected (usually male prescribed) social assumptions that the constellation of domestic functions are peculiarly hers. The important point is that the lesbian has sought wholeness

Women 1915. N.Y. State Historical Society.  
N.Y. Public Library Picture Collection.



within herself, not requiring, in the old romantic sense, to be "completed" by an opposite.

I do not wish to imply that a woman who is drawn to men, or who feels she loves a man, may not work to achieve these freedoms. But the men who will tolerate real autonomy in a woman partner, in whatever capacity, are so rare that I for one am skeptical of the possibility. It is a hard realization that a woman's need to love and be loved, to cherish and be cherished, may become her most painful hurdle—a bar to self-realization.

This pertains politically as well as personally. Despite the insights of some of our currently espoused ideologies and the (mainly expedient or token) gains for women as a result of their application, I know of no ideology that convinces me of the likelihood of women being rendered justice through a change of state master. The energies, skills and intelligence of women have been recognized and utilized within the several socialist countries more equitably on the whole than in the capitalist vocational arenas. But if unemployment looms, will women be rationalized back into "the home"? And what of our lesbian personalities, even today, in the socialist states?

I should like to be convinced to the contrary, but can anyone tell me of an existing male-birthed political system that would grant to a woman of lesbian temperament the uncontested right to freely live and love as required by her needs and nature? To create her art, write her poetry or voice her views in accordance with her vision of a society compatible with women's growth and flowering as *women*? I find it hard to give allegiance to the hope that this will happen in any society that requires acquiescence as a cog in a state machine, one whose practical daily politics is exerted to attain the predominance of that state over other states—the traditional, seemingly ineradicable male competitive stance. The means always determine the ends. No state power ever has acquiesced in its own withering away nor does any today show signs of being likely to.

Throughout my life I have defended the right to revolt against injustice. I have specifically defended the right of the Soviet peoples, the Cuban people, the people of China—all greatly to be admired despite reservations—to have the kind of society suitable to their needs and development. In the fifties I was called before the California Un-American Activities Committee, known as the Tenney Committee, and put on "trial" in the town where I lived for my views and political activities. I was accused of being "communist," which I was not. But one cannot expect tunnel vision bigots to differentiate between, say, Marxism and something resembling philosophical anarchism. Since I earned my living as a

free-lance writer and journalist I could not be deprived of a job by the publicity; but I did lose magazines that had been regularly accepting my work.

I am not blind to the dilemma my sort of radicalism poses. I have thought about it lifelong and have no answers, only increasing numbers of questions. Perhaps the artist, the lesbian artist in particular, always will have to survive within the interstices of the chicaneries and despotism of any power structure. But being more hopeful than that, as I am, can we as women, as lesbians, as artists, clearly delineate in our own minds what sort of a society we would like to live in? Any number of questions and tentative formulations should be advanced before we become arbitrary in our politics or suggest a course for women and the women's movement. In the meantime, can we at least agree not to give our energies or allegiance, to any ideology, movement, or existing society that is not demonstrating unequivocally its rejection of residues of discrimination against women?

I should like to end by proposing for meditation a brief comment by Mary Wollstonecraft made in an appendix to a collection of her letters written in the summer of 1796 during her travels in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. She had personally witnessed in Paris some of the excesses and horrors of the French Revolution, which nevertheless she espoused. The time in which she lived and wrote was no less disruptive of settled ways and views than ours today; and she had fearlessly exposed herself to their full tide. Burning radical where the eradication of human, especially women's, miseries and oppression were concerned, she wrote these considered words two years before her death:

"An ardent affection for the human race makes enthusiastic characters eager to produce alteration in laws and governments prematurely. To render them useful and permanent, they must be the growth of each particular soil, and the gradual fruit of the ripening understanding of the nation, matured by time, not forced by an unnatural fermentation."

*Elsa Gidlow is a poet who has made her living most of her life as a journalist. Her latest book SAPPHIC SONGS, Seventeen to Seventy, (Diana Press) includes recent work and lesbian love poems from her book On a Grey Thread, first published in 1923.*



Charlotte Cushman (1816-76) was an American actress renowned for her talent in playing both male and female roles and perhaps also for her lifelong attachments to women. She was intimate with many women artists, including Eliza Cook, a poet; Fanny Kemble and Matilda Hays, actresses; Geraldine Jewsbury, a feminist writer; Sara Jane Clark (pseudonym Grace Greenwood), a journalist; her sister Susan (who appears as Juliet in the illustration); and Harriet Hosmer, Emma Crow, and Emma Stebbins, American sculptors. She lived with Emma Stebbins for 19 years.

# Design for the City of Women

## Jacqueline Lapidus

to Catherine Blake

I.

a newborn conch  
sparkles on wet sand  
no bigger than a grain of rice  
already  
she knows how to secrete  
her own house

II.

Walking along the shore at low tide, I came to a place where the cliffs were white with salt, as if the tears of an entire continent had dried in an instant on the rock's flushed face. Above the high water mark was a row of irregularly shaped holes in which birds nested; above these, the earth was brick-red, and at the summit tufts of wild rosemary, thyme and fern thrust their heads into a hazy sky. As I stood admiring the wheeling flight of the gulls, I heard music coming from the next beach. I climbed over a shelf of mossy rocks, following the sound, and stumbled into the entrance of a grotto worn away in the cliff. The sun had not yet set. A shaft of late afternoon light slipped violet into the grotto and fell upon a circle of women sitting around a slab of rock that jutted out from the cavern wall like a table.

The women were not surprised to see me. They moved over to make room for me at the table. In the center of the table was a tide pool filled with mussels and clams. One of the women dipped her hand into the pool and scooped up several fresh clams with fluted shells which she offered to me. I pulled one from its shell with my teeth and swallowed it live; it slipped easily down my gullet, and in a few seconds I felt a warm, insistent throbbing between my legs as my clitoris emerged from its bed of wet moss. The women smiled at me and began to sing, in a language strangely familiar. I lay down naked on the rock ledge with my buttocks in the tide-pool, my arms and legs outstretched. The women leaned over me. Their cool fingers stroked my hands and feet, then my nipples and my clitoris. One woman slid her tongue deep into my cunt, and I felt a great wave surge through my entire body.

III.

concerned we are concerned  
we have always been alone together  
we have always confided in one another  
we have always found time to whisper  
amongst ourselves concerning our concerns  
long ago we learned to speak to each other  
with borrowed cups of sugar  
singing together as we washed our blood  
from endless sheets and towels  
nourishing each other with perpetual  
soup concerned we have

always been concerned  
for centuries our cheeks have brushed  
each other's cheeks at weddings,  
funerals, fairs and church bazaars  
we have tasted each other's tears  
laying out corpses  
we have stroked our sisters' bellies  
and held our daughters' hands  
and sung to their screams, and drawn  
babies gasping from their wombs  
concerned we are always concerned,  
oh yes we are used to one another  
bearing our burden together, struggling  
for a common cause: our own survival  
and now we are doing it  
openly and for ourselves

#### IV.

The women live in the grotto. They gather seaweed, moss and wild flowers which they eat raw, or pound into paste to form little cakes baked in the sun. Mussels, clams, shellfish and tiny crabs caught in the cracks of the rocks at low tide also nourish the women. Their bodies are strong, tanned and healthy. They have learned to conceive their babies parthenogenetically. Any woman, by concentrating her energy and projecting it into her lover's fertile womb, can get her with child. During pregnancy, the women caress each other's bellies to prepare the child for community. They give birth squatting: friends support the mother as she breathes, blows and grunts in rhythm with the others, who also sing to encourage her and maintain the breathing pattern. When the baby has emerged from the womb, they bathe it in sun-warmed sea water, lay it on the mother's belly, and massage it gently until it begins to smile. When a mother lacks milk for her child, another nursing mother offers the baby her breast. The women delight in the taste of one another's nipples, and send shivers of pleasure through their entire bodies by drinking one another's milk.

The women have lived together for so long that nearly all menstruate at the same time. During the menstrual period they feel particularly strong and exuberant. The power of their blood surges through them. Squatting on the beach, they study the patterns made by their blood on the sand, acquiring an intimate knowledge of the inner self. At night they perform the following ritual: The women reach into each other's cunts, extracting the blood with loving fingers, then paint each other's bodies with it. Images of pleasure flow from each woman onto her partner's face, breasts, belly and buttocks. Then they dance in spiral formation, singing of their lives, their loves. When a young girl menstruates for the first time, her mother or wet-nurse initiates her into the blood-painting ritual. Older women who no longer menstruate, excited by the younger women's caresses, secrete enough cyprine to paint their bodies. Although the symbols are colorless on their wrinkled skin, everyone can see them clearly.

#### V.

Dear Catherine, the message  
you could not then transmit to us  
has nonetheless arrived  
as surely as if etched with acid  
on the moon's dark side  
spreading like bacteria  
nourishing as bread  
decoded in our guts  
absorbed into the very tissues of our being  
and suddenly appearing  
as sweat, saliva, blood, cyprine  
women's language of love

*the words of the poems dance across the page,  
the birds in the air dance above the clouds,  
the fish in the water dance among the waves*

let us leave the drones to build cities  
let us play with each other like ribbons of light



VI.

The women are developing a new language, fully aware that although they have become a people capable of reproducing themselves, they can not consider themselves a nation unless they share a mother tongue. They expect this to take several centuries.

"We live," says Catherine, "in the crevices, the hollows, the spaces, the secret places, we live on the edge of the wave. The tide never goes out exactly as she came in—she always leaves us something we can use."

She reminds me that the little mermaid's fatal error was not that she longed for feet, but that she paid for them with her voice.

VII.

*Point.*  
*Pirouette.*  
*Spiral.*

Each dwelling shall begin with the self  
firmly planted on her own spot  
concentrating energy.

*Clitoris.*  
*Navel.*  
*Plexus.*  
*Psyche.*

Stretching, unfolding, expanding,  
turning, whirling  
outward upon her axis.

*Ears.*  
*Nostrils.*  
*Mouth.*  
*Vagina.*  
*Anus.*

Each orifice dilates, opening  
like windows, the air  
dances through the body.

*Cell.*  
*Chromosome.*  
*Molecule.*  
*Atom.*  
*Particle.*

Elements in orbit, exchanging  
surplus for need in perpetual motion,  
pleasurebound  
syntax, uniqueness  
incorporate.

*Jacqueline Lapidus is a radical lesbian feminist who lives in Paris. Her latest book of poems is Starting Over, published by Out and Out Press.*

# IRIS FILMS: Documenting The Lives of Lesbians

FRANCES REID

Iris Films is a feminist film distribution and production collective, currently comprised of three lesbians. We have recently completed a 16mm documentary film on lesbian mothers and child custody, "In The Best Interests Of The Children." This article is a record of our process of making that film, which is presented as a reflection of our politics and feelings as lesbian filmmakers.

Iris Films was begun in the spring of 1975 out of the desire to produce and distribute films that spoke to women in a way that the products of Hollywood do not. We saw ourselves as part of the movement of women to regain, define, and create our own culture.

In the fall of 1975 we were actively looking for films by other women to distribute, and were deciding to begin our own first production, a film defending the right of lesbian mothers to maintain custody of their children. We began interviewing dozens of lesbian mothers with cassette recorder, not only hearing their stories, but also sharing our own experiences as lesbians. One of the three of us is also a mother, and the other two of us are very committed to children as an integral part of our movement and community.

Our original plan was to make something that would appeal directly to those people who have the most power over a lesbian in a child custody situation: the judges, the probation officers, the attorneys, the social workers. As we talked more and more with different lesbian mothers and heard their stories, that conception began to change. We realized, with them, that what they had to say was important for the general public, for other lesbians and their children, and for the women's movement to hear. We began to broaden our image of the film and of who the audience would be, and to consider what compromises we would and would not make in order to make our statements. We knew that a film for judges and probation officers would have to be very low key and very liberal and that we would have to present very "acceptable" lesbians (in terms of their image, lifestyle, and statements)—the more middle class, and accepting of American, white, capitalist values, the better. We decided most adamantly that we didn't want to do that with the women that we had met who had become our friends. We found (not surprisingly) that the women who had the strongest statements to make about being lesbian mothers were not those who would be the most palatable to the "upholders of justice" in this country, since these women understood their oppression as lesbians to include the "upholders." They were not saying, "We just want to be

like everyone else, so please be good to us." They were saying, "We're happy, and we're healthy, and we're proud, and we're tired of being fucked over."

What we finally came up with—in rethinking, retalking, reworking our ideas in the months before we actually started shooting—was something in between the most radical film we could make, and one that the patriarchal powers could watch and learn from. We knew that we were in a position to take more risks than any lesbian mother facing a judge in a custody trial, and yet, if the film was to serve any useful propagandistic purpose for educating judges and the homophobic general public, we had to be making statements that such an audience could relate to. What we ended up with were a variety of women, situations, and statements that show how lesbian mothers are both the same as, and different from other mothers.

Once we had completed our initial interviews, we chose eight women and their children to be in the film. We made these choices based on a number of considerations. We wanted to show a cross-section of women based on class and race, on lifestyle, and on the numbers and ages of their children. We wanted the film to show that we were not speaking of only one particular type of lesbian, when we spoke of a lesbian's right to keep her children. So we chose from as broad a spectrum as we could, keeping in mind the specific experiences that each woman could speak to in the film.

The three of us had been working together as a collective, and we wanted to continue working that way once we began production on the film. Two of us were experienced filmmakers, and the third, although having no film experience, was very good at interviewing people. We were committed to the idea of sharing skills in our work, and because of this, we decided that each of us would be in charge of an area where she felt the most expertise (the three areas were camera, sound recording, and directing/interviewing), but that all of us would have an opportunity to work at each of these. We found that having a well-thought-out common vision of what we wanted the film to be, made it possible for us to do this. We had other women working on the film with us (usually helping with lighting or camera assistance), but none of them were involved in the collective process. They would commit themselves to working on the film on a day-to-day basis, as it fit into their schedules.

As feminists, we found our priority was to deal with the feelings of the women and children we were filming, rather than doing whatever necessary to get what we

wanted on film. We would never push to get a shot when we felt there was resistance, or if it seemed too disruptive. This, and the mothers' understanding about the need for this film, made them very cooperative and adaptable to our needs. Although it was an unfamiliar situation for most of them, and there was some nervousness, the general feeling when we turned on the cameras was relaxed and open.

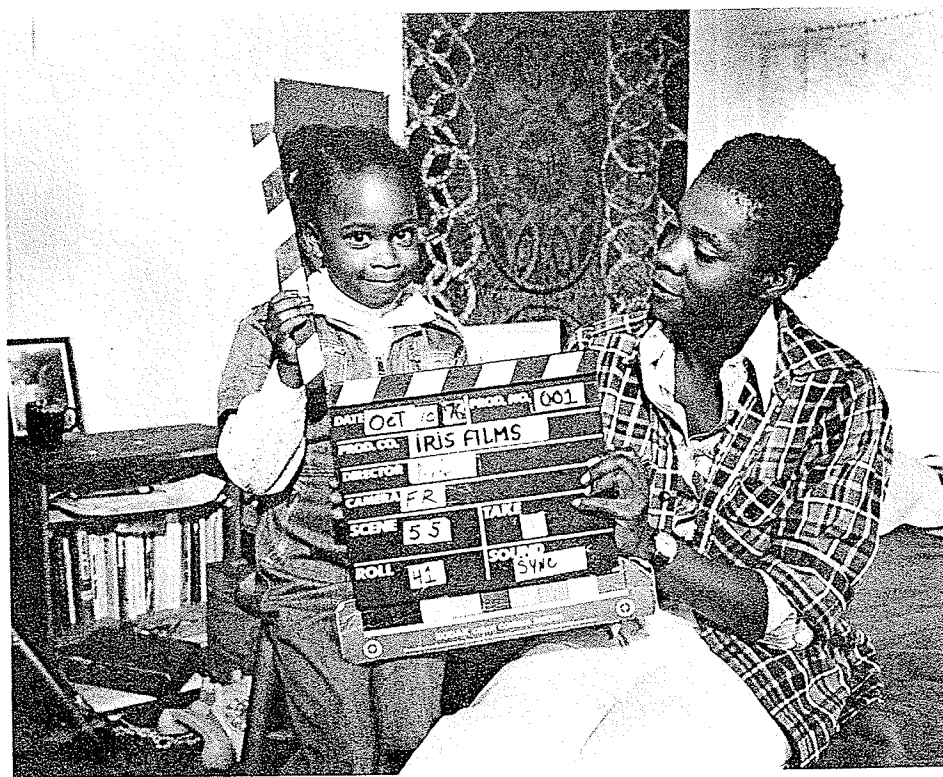
We decided sometime in September that, in addition to filming the children with their mothers, we would like to get the children talking with each other about their common experience. We arranged this with the children of three of the mothers from northern California, plus two other children whose mothers were not in the film. There was a lot of energy and excitement from the children, because the focus was on them and what *they* had to say, and because they could talk with peers about their mothers, and could share their feelings and experiences without fear of being put down. Filming the children by themselves added a new perspective to the film, both in terms of what they had to say, and the openness with which they said it.

We spent the months from November, 1976, to May, 1977, editing and fundraising, and when we finally got the necessary money (primarily from three small foundations, from a concert in Los Angeles, and from individual donations), we completed the final steps of recording the music, filming pick-up shots and still photos, making the titles, and doing the final cutting, mixing, timing, and lab work. We have produced a film that we hope will be an effective political tool for

lesbians to use, within their communities for fund and consciousness-raising, for the general public (we are trying to get the film on public television), and for use in educating the powers involved in custody cases in the courts.

As lesbian filmmakers, we see ourselves as cultural workers. We see film primarily as a political tool, and secondarily as an art form. We do recognize, however, the importance of giving our work a strong, vibrant, and positive esthetic, as the most effective way of getting our message across to the audience. A shoddy esthetic does not change people; it bores them and turns them off. In this respect, we see it as our responsibility to create films that are artistically as well as politically compelling.

We plan to continue working as a collective, both for our distribution and for our production work. Our challenge to ourselves is to make filmmaking much more available to women who have never had access to the power of the media, and yet who have important statements to make about their lives and about the society we live in. This includes third world women, working class and poor women, especially those who are lesbians, as women who are traditionally denied training or jobs where they could learn and utilize filmmaking skills. We do not believe that doing this kind of cultural work will *make* the revolution, but we do believe that it is an important aspect for inspiring and organizing women towards the goal of making radical changes in our social, political, and economic structures.



Production photo from *In The Best Interests of The Children*. Photo courtesy Iris Films.

Iris Films' 16mm, 52 minute, color documentary on Lesbian mothers, "*In The Best Interests Of The Children*," is available for sale or rental. For information write to Iris Films, Box 26463, Los Angeles, California, 90026, (213) 483-5793.

Francis Reid is a thirty-three year old feminist filmmaker and organizer. Some of her work has included organizing *The Feminist Eye*—a conference for women in media, and founding Iris Films.

# A New York City Collective

About fifteen women have been part of the group at various times, and there are five women in the group at present. We are: Ellen Turner, Flavia Rando, Fran Winant, Jessica Falstein, and Maxine Fine. We give each other support, criticism and feedback concerning our work and our lives.

We participated in the art shows at the Gay Academic Union Conferences in 1974 and 1975. We offset copies of our drawings at Come!Unity Press with the words "Lesbian Art" written on them and pasted them up on the streets, in subways, and near museums, art schools, and women's bars. In March, 1976, we gave a slide show at the Women's Coffee House to bring our work to the community, which might otherwise not see it, and to de-mystify the process of how we make our art. In June, 1976, we had a group show at Mother Courage Restaurant. A day after the show opened, the restaurant called Flavia, and told her they found her semi-abstract painting of a woman's genitals "offensive and in poor taste," and demanded that she take it down. A series of meetings between the restaurant and our collective followed. Our group was torn between taking down all our work or making some compromise. We finally removed the "offending" painting and put up a statement describing the painting and what had taken place and explaining Flavia's artistic intentions in creating the work. We allowed this experience to have a destructive effect on the group. After the usual summer break we did not meet again for 5 months. When we resumed meeting, we tried to rediscuss "The Mother Courage Incident" but could never resolve our conflicted feelings about what would have been the best way we could have supported Flavia. We are now trying to expand the focus of the group to deal with more of our interests such as poetry, photography, Tai Chi and dance.

The following discussion is about what it means to us to be a lesbian and an artist.

MF: I was just wondering if everyone here is a lesbian.

(A chorus of "Yes.")

ET: Are we lesbian artists or are we just people?

FR: Even today when I see a picture of Gertrude Stein, Alice Toklas, or Romaine Brooks or see or read their work, I get a thrill. Knowing about these women has sustained me through a lot of years. Really that's the value of this lesbian issue of *Heresies*—showing us that lesbian artists exist. As for what it means to be a lesbian artist—I don't even know what it means for me to be an artist.

MF: In the past we've talked about how galleries don't want to exhibit work by open lesbians, but how does it feel to be a lesbian artist within the lesbian community? How relevant is it? What kind of an impact on

the politics do we have, and on lesbians' lives?

FR: I can't even get to that point. I keep thinking that so much of what I do all day, not just working, but the over-all pattern of my life, is a fight to make room for my psyche in both the lesbian community and the outside world. I'm fighting to be an artist, fighting for a few hours of free time, for money. Being an artist is extra, you don't do it to live. Just as being a lesbian is extra, not to me but to the world. We have to fight to make emotional space for it.

FW: I used to think it was desirable that the community's politics and art should influence each other. But, I think what happens with political art is that it *reflects* the community's politics; it doesn't influence them. The majority of creative women appear not to want to do that kind of art. They may feel some pressure from their own politics or the belief that the community might respond better to this type of art, but they can't force their creativity to function that way.

MF: Did you ever do that kind of art?

FW: In my poetry...

MF: I mean in your painting.

FW: No, I never wanted to. The closest I came to wanting to do something political was wanting to make portraits of women, including some lesbians of the past.

ET: I think it's connected with societal patterns. The Communist Party has their artists do Communist imagery. So when we hear about lesbian art, we think we have to document the rhetoric of the lesbian movement to be a full-fledged lesbian artist. There has to be a different way to experience ourselves as lesbian artists instead of having to go by patterns and definitions set up by the straight world. We have to set up new ones. Art can document what's internalized in our beings, rather than literal and surface realities that political movements deal with.

FR: I used to always think that being a lesbian artist was just the fact that I was a lesbian and an artist, and everything I did was going to reflect my lesbianism.

FW: Like anything that's important to you, your lesbianism *will* influence what you create.

MF: Part of the problem in struggling with this idea of what lesbian art is, is the implication that there is an already-defined and homogeneous lesbian culture and that any lesbian within that culture would reflect it.

FW: We're supposed to be like an ethnic group.

MF: But we're not even given credit for having that kind of richness. We don't realize it ourselves and our lesbian culture doesn't encourage it. I think there is a fear of differences and individualism which really boils down to lesbians not trusting each other. Having to classify ourselves or our work may make things more clear but it's also a form of control. It's especially a problem if you're working as an abstract artist and don't

deal with real things.

JF: You mean recognizable things.

MF: Yes. Then you get into an area of ideas and feelings there's no room for among our lesbian sisters. There's no place for you as an artist or a person.

FR: The best lesbian art would be if every lesbian in this country claimed everything she did as a lesbian creation. That's really what we're talking about.

FW: Feminist artists are eager to do that with their feminist art. Part of the history of the lesbian movement has been an insistence on defining ourselves, and that's still valid, that still has to continue.

FR: Even using the term "lesbian art" is accepting a very narrow definition. Here we are: five lesbian artists in a lesbian art collective. We each do completely different work and only Ellen's, because it's autobiographical, is what would generally be recognized as lesbian art. All we can really say is that our art is a product of everything we are and our lesbianism is an important part of what we are.

JF: I think the definition has grown out of our oppression. When we get together we don't have to keep reinforcing our lesbianism.

FR: It matters politically because if I don't say I'm a lesbian then no one will know and then part of me will constantly be denied.

JF: I don't think there is a single common denominator to all work done by lesbians. We're oppressed because of our invisibility. It's important that a magazine be filled with work done by women and all these women be lesbians. But try to look for the connecting key and you won't find any.

FW: I think it would mean something important if we could come out with a statement like, "I'm a lesbian artist because my community gives me the strength to be an artist."

(Shouts of "No.")

FW: I've had these feelings very strongly. Like the woman who was ordained as a minister who said, "My

lesbian lover gives me great spiritual strength." If we could say, "My lesbian community, or my lover, gives me creative strength," then I think it would be more meaningful to be a lesbian artist. It would also be much clearer what it meant to be one. The fact that we can't say these things is a loss to us.

FR: I could have said that during a certain time in my life. That kind of outside support of one's existence can help a person to create art to a degree, for a certain amount of time. But after that you have to pick it up in a different way and have it be more internal.

ET: But do you think the exterior support and enthusiasm still exists for the women who need them? I'm not experiencing this. A lot that used to happen doesn't happen any more.

FR: The culture we all grew up in is not set up for art. An artist in our culture has to be very aggressive and able to publicize herself. I don't think we can blame the lesbian community.

ET: I don't think the lesbian community really tries to initiate anything.

FR: Art itself is a luxury in our culture and the lesbian community has so much trouble surviving...

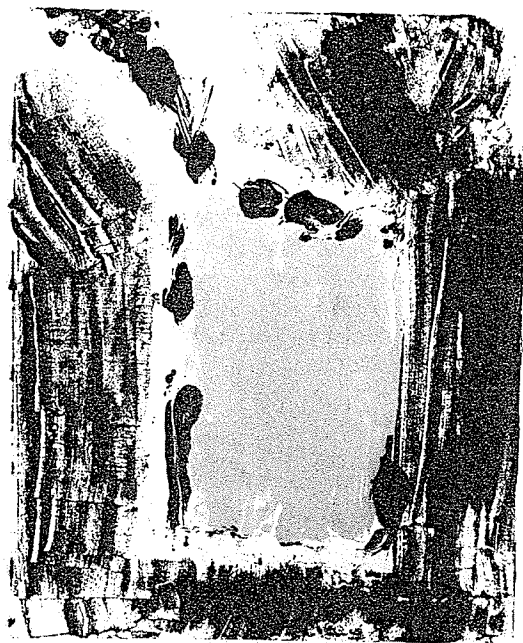
ET: Certain things are sought out in the lesbian community. Books, women's presses, records. It's more than what's available for visual artists.

FR: Didn't writers do the presses and musicians create the record companies?

FW: There are a lot of women's book stores with wall space and possibly we could have travelling exhibitions. It wouldn't be one big gallery in New York, but at least somebody could send pieces around to smaller places.

MF: I helped Myra Nissim put up a show of photographs in a woman's space where new work hadn't been hung in over a year. Afterwards, other women put up work. You have to create the idea and make it happen and then other people will be inspired by it. And you have to keep feeding it or it will stop.

FW: There's a tremendous barrier to defining your-



*This Makes Me Feel Good* '76 Maxine Fine

Maxine Fine. *This Makes Me Feel Good*. n.d. Monoprint. 9" x 11".

Photo by eeva-inkeri.



Ellen Turner. *Self Portrait #2*. 1977. Colored pencils. 11" x 13 7/8".

Photo by eeva-inkeri.



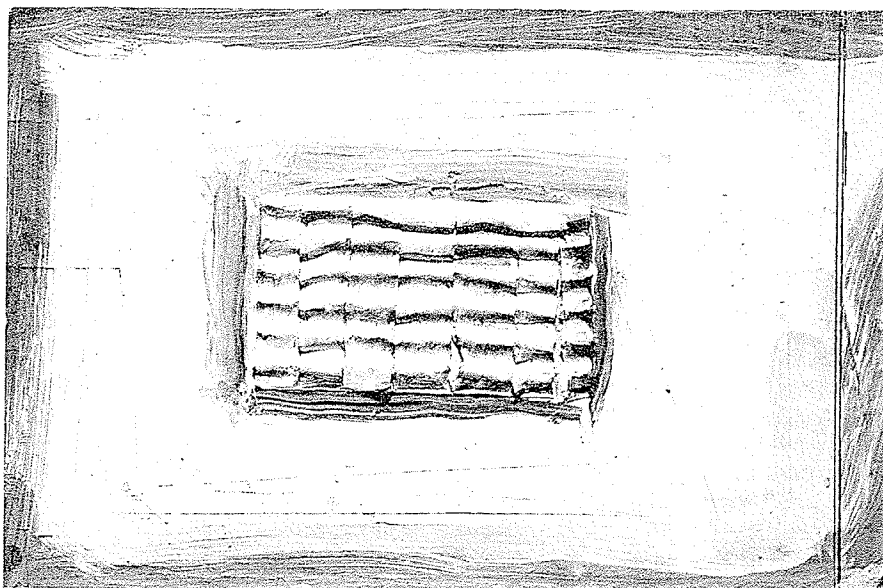


Photo by eeva-inkeri.

Jessica Falstein. *Untitled*. 1977. Cardboard collage with oil and gesso

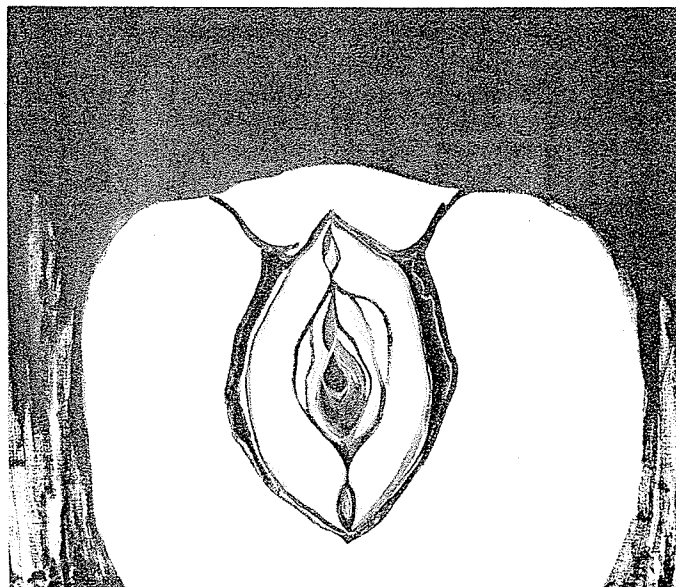


Photo by eeva-inkeri.

Flavia Rando. *Untitled*. n.d. Oil. 21 1/2" x 25".



Photo by eeva-inkeri.

Fran Winant. *Dog With Secret Language*. n.d. Acrylic. 24" x 36".

self as a creative person. Part of it is the problem of where the work will go. When you create something, it goes up on a wall and you wonder if it's now part of the community—are people reacting? Unless you're there with it, you're never sure. A month later it's off that wall completely and out of sight.

ET: It's going to hit some people and not others.

FR: The visual artist in our culture, including the lesbian culture, is in a real bind. If it's not saleable to the masses, forget it—if you don't have the kind of work you can put into book form, record form, film form, something that can have multiples. Otherwise, it ends up being shown in an expensive space that most people aren't interested in going to. I wonder what would happen if someone opened a lesbian art gallery.

MF: Probably such a gallery would be blasted by critics in the straight presses who would want to destroy the concept behind it.

MF: I once thought of doing drawings in bars and making prints from them. I was looking for a source of inspiration in the lesbian community. I never did those drawings and it's basically because I'm not a realist and it's not the thing that interests me. The closest I got to realism was doing abstractions of my own organs after an operation. I keep having to go into myself in order to find what I need and then after a while I feel exhausted. I need more inspiration from outside. I wonder how many of us get inspiration for what we do as artists from lesbians, the lesbian community?

FR: I think we're in a privileged position just being part of a lesbian community at all and being in a lesbian artists' group. We have reached out to the community through our slide shows and exhibits and have gotten some positive response. It takes a certain mentality to be an explicitly political artist of any kind and it doesn't follow that because we're lesbians we're going to draw our direct subject matter from the community.

FW: I had a secret thought that maybe one purpose of the lesbian issue was to put pressure on those lesbians who had "made it" in the art world to come out and state publicly that they are lesbians. People used to wonder why there weren't women artists of great stature; then they found out there were. Now some people probably wonder why there aren't lesbian artists of stature comparable to certain straight feminist artists. There are, but they don't identify themselves as lesbians. We're in a position where we are asking for more support from our community or we're asking for enough support to give us a reason to go on doing things at all. But there are some lesbians who have already gotten all their support from the mainstream society. If some of those women came out it would make the lesbian community more aware of art and of artists, and it might be a form of support for all lesbian artists. But what is Ms. X. going to get out of coming out?

ET: A nice open door reading "exit" from the galleries.

MF: It might be a big ego trip to come out at this point.

ET: If that woman is recognized and has substantial power in the art market then she would be a great token gesture for gay liberation.

FR: These women are so well hidden that it comes through only as a secret thought that there may be lesbians today—not just a few from the past—who are in a position where they understand a lot of things we are struggling to understand. And the way they got there

was to completely deny publicly their lesbianism.

MF: I don't know how much they understand.

FR: They understand how to market themselves in our culture.

MF: A lot of lesbian artists who are in the closet would probably say, "Well, I never thought of that as an issue. My private life is private; what counts is my work. The fact that I'm a lesbian is totally irrelevant to my gallery and the people who buy my work." I don't think there's a hell of a lot I could learn from that person. I could learn something from a person who hadn't come out but who wasn't going to deny her lesbianism and its relevance to her struggles.

FR: That's a very idealistic position. I would like to know how she kept going, how she worked through the internal struggle of being a lesbian in our culture.

JF: I find that I have a real need for role models—strong, creative women to serve as inspiration.

MF: A woman who denies the relevance of her lesbianism to her work is no role model.

ET: My feeling is that she would never really understand the connection.

FR: I'm not saying that I'm going to like this woman, but I think that writing her off is a mistake. She's struggled to succeed and she knows a lot.

MF: I get a certain thrill when I hear about women who have made it. I want that recognition also. A lot of my feelings have absolutely nothing to do with feminism. They just have to do with being alive and not wanting to be isolated. I want to make some kind of impact. If someone is receptive to my work it makes me feel good. I don't care who the person is.

ET: Well I'm going to start pushing myself in the art world. I'm really petrified to come out. That world that I see out there is straight. If I want to stay out of the closet then it will probably be difficult to develop a career for myself in the art world.

FR: I more or less do that when I go to work. I don't particularly come out. But when it comes to my art it seems so much more important. Otherwise why bother to do it? I don't want to use my art to hide myself. Why do we assume the lesbian community is relatively uninvolved in art? We forget about all these lesbians who have accomplished something because they're not out. It's frightening. When we think about the lesbian community we don't think about women who have accomplished things in the world. We slip into the same thinking as other people; we assume they don't exist. What does it mean to be an artist and a lesbian? We're still at the point of stating that we're lesbians.

*Maxine Fine is a painter and a student of Tai Chi Chu'an. Her most recent one woman show was at Aames Gallery in 1976.*

*Ellen Turner is an upfront dyke who uses art as a tool for political and social communication within the lesbian community.*

*Fran Winant is a painter and poet, author of Looking at Women and Dyke Jacket (Violet Press). Her work was in the 1976-77 Woman in the Arts show "Artists' Choice."*

*Jessica Falstein is a painter and collagist living in New York City. Her last one-woman show was in March, 1977, at Djuna Books.*

*Flavia Rando is a landscape painter and a student of dance.*

# Lesbian Art and Community

## Marguerite Tupper Elliot

*With much love and appreciation for my women's art group: Marcie Baer, Marianne Daransky, Vanalyne Green, Meg Harlam, Annette Hunt, Diana Johnson, Connie Jost, Ellen Ledley, Melissa Mathis, Anne Phillips, Terry Platt, E.K. Waller, Denise Yarfitz*

I do not want to say that lesbian art looks like such and such. It is still too early and we would be excluding a lot of work made by lesbians if we were to put definitions on it. What I would like to do is to take the stigma off the label of lesbian art. I identify myself as a lesbian artist as an acknowledgment, an affirmation. In the act of naming, there is power. Since there has been so much oppression around being a lesbian, I would like to see lesbian artists, myself included, make the most outrageous lesbian art we can think of. I would like to see us free enough to be incredibly lesbian in our art-making process.

Last year, as part of a cultural event produced by the Los Angeles League for the Advancement of Lesbianism in the Arts (LALALA) held at the Woman's Building, Anne Phillips and myself curated a show by lesbian artists titled "Reflections of Lesbian Culture." My impetus in curating this show came from a desire to meet lesbian artists outside of the Woman's Building, to show their work, and to create a context for the lesbian work my friends and I were making. Initially, I felt frustration at the lack of availability of lesbian feminist art. For example, some women did not want to be identified with a lesbian show. Because lesbian art has been so invisible, there were a lot of expectations and tensions about what a lesbian show should look like. There was pressure from some women to include all the work that was submitted; others wanted "high quality, professional" work. Anne and I selected work that in some way reflected a lesbian and/or feminist consciousness. As we did not have a set definition as to what we thought lesbian art should look like, the work we selected varied over a wide range of attitudes and media. This was my first experience of a specifically lesbian audience and the appreciative responses were incredible.

We found the installation of the show to be somewhat controversial. It was strongly suggested that we take out two photographs from a group, as they did not present a "positive" lesbian image. Granted we would like to represent the lesbian community in the best way possible, and yet, what kind of censorship are we placing on it? Can we expect to have validating lesbian images overnight? It is my belief that we need to see where we have come from in order to have a solid base on which to grow.

Our experience with the art establishment forces us to look at the lack of places in which to show lesbian art. Locally, there is the Woman's Building. After that, it's back to the closet again. Presently, if women want their work available to the public, they are forced to use male-identified galleries. That will usually lead to some kind of conscious or unconscious censorship in order to make the work more acceptable. Also, by showing with the traditional galleries, women are supporting the elitist art establishment.

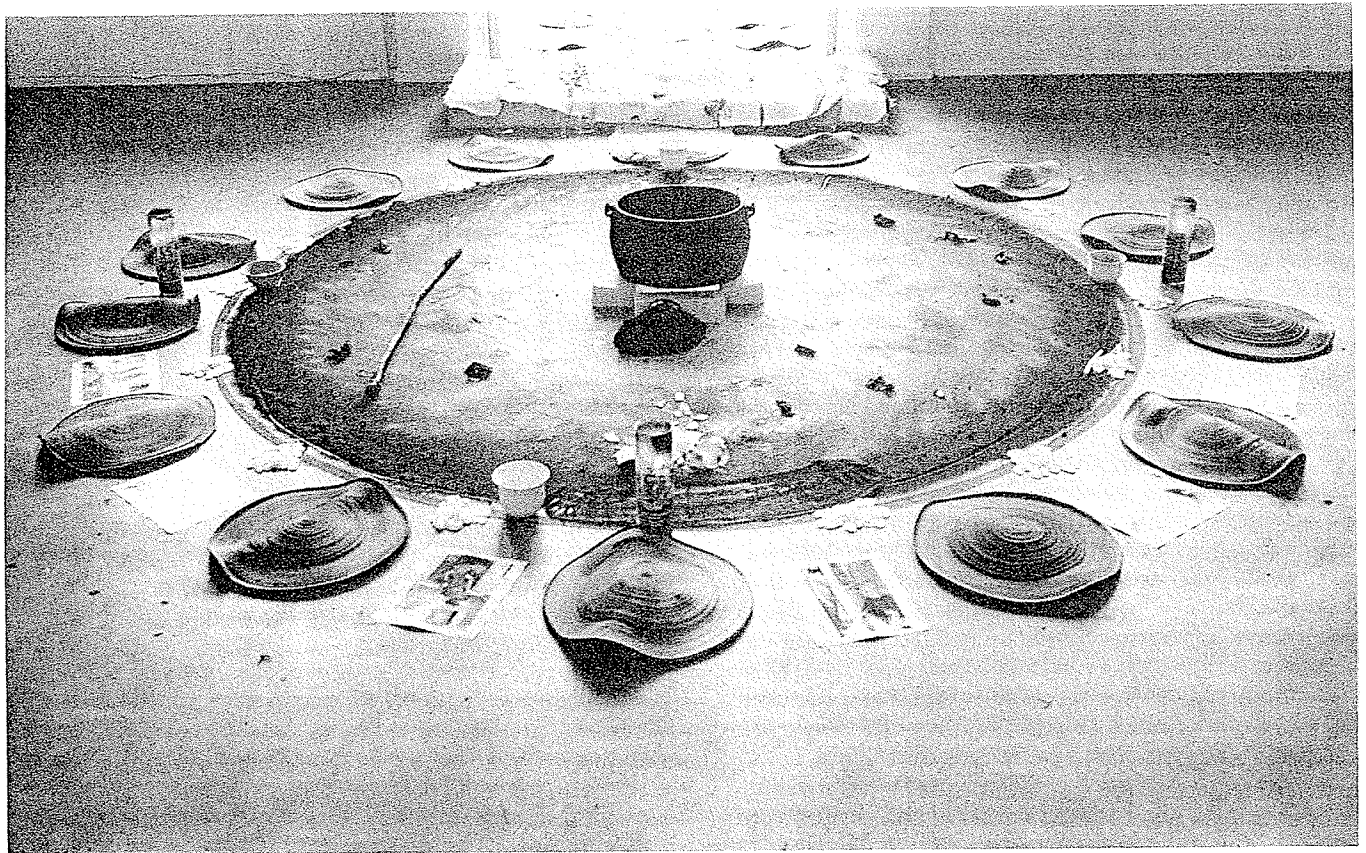
Within the lesbian community in Los Angeles, I feel there still exists a mystification of the visual arts and its relevance in our lives, resulting in a separation between art and politics. This is important to recognize when looking for a lesbian audience. Lesbian writers are getting their work out through feminist presses and women's bookstores. Lesbian musicians are getting their work out through feminist recording and production companies. Where is there a similar network for lesbian artists? During the past four years there have been hundreds of shows at the Woman's Building, only one of which was exclusively lesbian, and few of which have been reviewed in the local feminist presses. It is evident that we have not considered visual art to be newsworthy or political. Part of this has to do with the fact that we as artists have not yet found a way to be directly accessible and responsible to the larger feminist community. Until recently women had to rely on male publications if they wanted their work to be written about, which in turn meant they had to exhibit in male galleries. In order for lesbian artists to be visible, they had to go through the male establishment; then they could be discovered and honored by the feminist communities. We are only beginning to trust our own values enough to stand behind women's art that hasn't received male approval.

In my feminist artist group our growth has been an organic one. In coming together to share our work we give support and criticism to each other, and validation as artists in a world that barely recognizes or values the art-making process. It is of primary importance to me that our relationships with each other have developed through our work as opposed to developing in the bars or on the dance floor. For me, it has been a source of survival and growth. Most of us have participated in the Feminist Studio Workshop and have learned similar tools for critique. Our experiences and education prior to that in the straight art world, make it very easy to slip back into old patterns and value structures. Knowing that our viewpoint will be ignored by the art world, we turn to each other to answer questions that are meaning-

ful to ourselves. I have experienced isolation and otherness when I am with artists who are dealing with formal issues in their work or who are not conscious of feminist issues. In our group, by acknowledging ourselves and other women to be our audience, we are creating the context in which to show our work. I feel that direct lesbian imagery would have taken much longer to develop or wouldn't have developed at all, if the work had not been understood or encouraged. We stop the process of accepting male art as universal, which makes our art merely a part of their system. We are not creating alternatives. Webster defines alternative as that which may be chosen in place of something else. We are already the something else. Would we want the kind of audience that perpetuates the oppressive values of the art galleries? One woman in our group, Terry Platt, is show-

ing her work in various feminist households, treating it as a traveling show. Terry is almost directly accessible to the people who will be seeing her work, and in the process has redefined the relationship between the audience and the artist. The economics of our art is also being examined in relationship to our values. In order to make our art accessible perhaps we need to sell our work on a sliding scale or graphically mass produce it so as to be affordable. We are just beginning to see the issues involved with audience and economics.

We are now faced with the same circumstances which, in the past, have kept lesbian artists invisible. We need to see that the same thing does not happen to us. Our art which is reflective of our experiences will chronicle our struggles, growth, and strength in formulating our lesbian feminist world.



Marguerite Elliot, Anne Phillips and Cheryl Swannack. *Ritual*. 1975. Photo credit unknown.

Marguerite Tupper Elliot, lesbian feminist artist and curator, currently lives in Los Angeles. Former co-director of the Woman's Building Galleries, she is now employed at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. Media-wise, she works with ceramics, photography and words. A large part of her work has been collaborative.

# GENERATION

CHRISTINE WADE

I have made distinctions  
Between the child and her mother,  
Yet the difference between  
The wind  
And the sound of the wind at night  
Often makes me dream  
Of falling sparrows.

Barbara Grossman

C.'s mother M. is five feet two, weighs one hundred and eight pounds and speaks the King's English. She is Protestant. She always wanted C. to speak properly and often corrected her mid-sentence. Even so C. doesn't stutter. C.'s mother M. has blonde hair, green eyes and high cheek bones. C. hates to be told she is like her mother though in some ways she is. They both have small hands. C.'s mother M. was born in September in 1916 in England. C.'s mother M. is British but took American citizenship in 1957. She was raised by her great aunt in Preston, Lancashire, and went to Catholic boarding schools. She had long light blonde hair and the nuns were angry with her when she cropped it short. She liked to ride horses and play cricket. She was required to dress for dinner in her home and to eat each course with the correct utensils. C.'s mother M. sometimes complained about the trauma of C.'s birth. It was evidently very tiresome and painful. She could not breast feed because of heavy anesthesia. C. weighed a lot when she was born. She had a big head, was fat, and cried a lot.

K.'s mother K. is five feet five, weighs one hundred and forty pounds and speaks with an upstate New York accent. Her A's are flat and nasal. K.'s A's are not as flat as her mother's. K.'s mother K. has grey hair and blue eyes. K.'s mother K. recently dyed her hair brown and K. thinks she looks funny. She is Catholic. K. always insists that she looks like her mother K. even though she looks like her father too. K. will reluctantly admit that her legs are bowed like her father's. K.'s mother K. lives in Buffalo, New York, where K. was born and where K.'s mother was born too. K.'s mother K. was born in 1924. K.'s mother's mother was Irish but K.'s mother K. was raised in Buffalo. K.'s mother's mother was a maid for wealthy families. K.'s mother K. used to go sometimes with her mother and play in the homes of wealthy families. K. was born to her mother K. when she was thirty years old. She is the middle child of five children, two sons and three daughters. K.'s birth was difficult relative to the other children, but she was a medium sized and healthy baby.

R.'s mother J. is five feet nine, weighs one hundred and forty pounds and has a Brooklyn accent. She speaks loudly and is Jewish. She has red curly hair, blue eyes and freckles. Her hair used to be bright red but it is faded now. R. looks very much like her mother J. but she is not as tall and she has blonde hair. R. is sometimes taken to be her mother over the phone although she speaks very softly. R.'s mother J. was born in 1930 in Brooklyn, New York. Then she moved to New Jersey by way of Queens where she raised her family. When R.'s mother J. lived in Brooklyn she very much wanted to go to the public school but her parents insisted that she go to the more prestigious private school. She eventually went away to Syracuse University. R. was born to her mother J. in 1954, was the middle child and her mother's first daughter. R. weighed seven pounds when she was born. R.'s mother J. was in labor with R. a long time but her birth was not painful.

C.'s mother M. has been a secretary and a sales clerk, although she had wanted to be a veterinarian. She is now a housewife, although she does volunteer work for the Westminster Theatre Company and takes painting and French in an adult education program. While she lived in Munich C.'s mother M. was not allowed to work because wives of officers in the State Department were not allowed to work. C.'s mother M. lives in London now and is not allowed to work because it is difficult for American citizens to get working papers. C.'s mother M. supported C.'s father through graduate school at the London School of Economics, but this was before C. was born. When C. was six her mother went to work part-time but she didn't tell anyone that she was working for several months because she felt she had to prove that she could work and be a good mother too. C.'s mother M. always told C. that she could be anything she wanted to be and encouraged her in any area that C. showed promise of talent. C.'s mother M. wanted C. to be a doctor, dancer, scholar, writer, artist, linguist, a good wife and happy. Most of all she wanted C. to be happy.

K.'s mother K. used to go to work sometimes with her mother, the domestic servant. This was how she got her first jobs babysitting and cleaning. K.'s mother K. was a secretary before she was married. After she was married she typed sometimes at home for extra money. She typed for Amway Co. at one-half cents per page so that she could buy a bicycle for her daughter. Later K.'s mother K. worked in a factory so that K.'s father could collect unemployment. They each got fifty dollars per



week, which combined was more than K.'s father could earn as a carpenter. K.'s mother K. hated the factory. The workers that worked there were mostly men and she would come home covered with grease. The other women who worked there were very masculine and unlike K.'s mother K. K.'s mother K. now works in the Post Office. She worked at night for many years. K.'s mother K. chose the night shift because she thought she would have more time to spend with her children that way, but the result of this was only that she was perpetually dazed. K. resented that her mother K. had to work so much and couldn't spend more time with her family. K.'s mother K. is really glad that K. could go to college. It was very important to her that all her children could go to college. She feels better for that.

R.'s mother J. left Syracuse University and transferred to Adelphi University when she married so that she could live with her husband in Queens. The single-most motivation for her marriage was her belief that she could not take care of herself, economically or psychologically. Just before she married she wrote to her mother asking her to discourage her from marrying. She did not. R.'s mother J. didn't work after she was married but started having a family. Later she went to a psychiatrist because she was very depressed. She went for ten years. Six years after starting therapy she got a job as a social worker and went to graduate school at Columbia in social work. R.'s mother J. likes her job but feels that she is underpaid and that the work is overwhelming. She was fired once for taking a sixteen year old girl from a Catholic home to have an abortion, but the American Civil Liberties Union initiated proceedings and got her job back, but without back pay. R.'s mother J. wants R. to be able to take care of herself. At the same time she wants, in any way that she can, to help take care of R. R.'s mother J. wants R. to be happy and she is impressed that R. is living in New York and taking care of herself.

C.'s mother M. used to tell her she was sick and tired of her derogatory remarks. C.'s mother M. used to tell her she had a headache. She used to tell her she was a good girl. C. remembers the sound of her mother's voice when she told her she was a good girl. It would make C. flush with pleasure. C.'s mother M. was uncommonly proud of C.'s ability to be bad. When C. was very young C.'s mother M. used to tell her friends that C. was a regular terror that one couldn't keep up with for she was always into everything. C.'s mother M. was particularly convinced of C.'s intelligence and spunk. C.'s mother M. used to tell her about Nazi atrocities.

C.'s mother M. drove an ambulance during the bombing of London. She used to collect her sugar ration for months to have birthday parties for orphans and relocated children, victims of the war. One time the sugar was really salt and the children were disappointed. One night she drove the ambulance into a bomb crater and hurt her back. She had to soak it in hot baths after that but hot water in London was difficult to come by. When C. was eight she went to school and told the other children about the Nazi atrocities that her mother had told her about. C. was fascinated by war stories. C.'s mother talked a lot to C. about the war and with a peculiar enthusiasm.

K.'s mother K. used to tell her how pretty she was, especially in the days when K. had long hair and wore make-up and short skirts. K.'s mother K. tells her about fires, plane crashes, fatal illnesses and deaths due to exposure. K.'s mother K. thinks these things are terrible and tells K. about them over the phone. They also discuss their family and politics. K. can usually convince her mother K. of her political views if she talks to her long enough. K.'s mother K. has been a worker for many years. K.'s mother K. has worked at the Post Office for ten years. When she worked at night she used to come home in the early morning to take care of her senile and bedridden mother. Her biggest fear as she was climbing the stairs was that this was one of the nights that her mother had shit and then, in anger at not having her calls answered, had flung her shit around the room. K.'s mother K. did not like to face this in the early morning after working all night. K.'s mother K. would clean up, wash her mother and then get her children ready for school.

R.'s mother J. likes to tell her about the bargains she buys. R.'s mother J. tells R. that she is too self-critical and too critical of her mother too. R. admits that this is true. R.'s mother J. tells R. how pretty she is. R.'s mother J. told her once about how when she was young her mother would say to her if ever she indicated any fear: "Afraid? What are you afraid of? There is nothing to be afraid of," and R.'s mother J. would mimic her mother's tone of voice. It was painful for R.'s mother J. to have her fears mocked and she vowed that she would give credence to the fears of her children. When R. was fifteen she once made a list of all the things she was afraid of. When she came to item sixty-eight she began to think that the list was pretty funny. She showed it to her mother J. and they laughed together about there being only sixty-eight things to be afraid of. Later R.'s mother J. told R. that she had shown this list to her

psychiatrist. R.'s mother J. was very apologetic, for she was usually invariably moral about respecting the privacy of her children, but R. felt relieved because the matter had been taken up with the proper authorities.

C.'s mother M. often tells lies. This pained C. very much when she first discovered her mother's lies. She cried. Later she felt relieved. It meant that C.'s mother M. was, in fact, crazy and it meant that if C. didn't lie she wouldn't be crazy like her mother M. C. started discovering her mother's lies when she was thirteen. She broke the glass of a picture that her mother had done and discovered that the picture was actually a print of somebody else's. C.'s mother M. knit her a pair of mittens, but the mittens had a store label in them. C. wanted to show her mother the store label but C.'s sister convinced her not to. C.'s impulse was always to treat her mother like a real responsible person. C.'s father and sister often tried to convince her that C.'s mother could not be treated like a fully capacitated person. C.'s mother M. is after all quite crazy and is to be treated with condescension. C.'s impulse is to confront her mother honestly, but this causes C. and her mother so much pain and it causes others such discomfort and it begets them so little that C. often refutes this impulse. She is encouraged in this restraint by her father and sister for it makes things go more smoothly. It is for the sake of expedience. C.'s participation in this paradigm of protection and this conspiracy against her mother, this tampering with reality and this denial of her mother's experience causes her much guilt and anxiety. She identifies with her mother and yet she betrays her.

After her last child was born K.'s mother K. thought seriously about abandoning her husband, taking her four children and leaving the baby with his father. She realized then that she was trapped and lonely in a large house with someone who didn't love her and was never at home. She didn't have anyone she could discuss this with. K.'s mother K. realized then that her children were her only life. She stayed. K. hated the way her father used to humiliate her mother in front of his friends. K.'s mother K. would be serving coffee to K.'s father's friends and he would deliberately demean K.'s mother K. in front of his friends. K. despised this more than anything. K. hated her father with vehemence mostly for what he did to her mother. In collusion K. and her mother K. used to make jokes about K.'s father. They would get back at him privately by making fun of him and making him ridiculous. This was not difficult. Now K. and her mother K. no longer make fun of her father. He has less power. K. realizes how pathetic and deflated he is, and how her mother K. will need someone to grow old with. K.'s mother K. is now slightly embarrassed about making fun of K.'s father. After all she married him. The pain of her marriage is distant and removed. The worst battles have been fought and won and are of a different time. K. feels that much of her mother K.'s energy has been wasted. K.'s mother K. is not one to make much of her own needs or her pride. K. feels that her mother K.'s close relation to her children, in spite of economic hardship and great personal sacrifice, has kept her fundamentally human and enriched.

R.'s mother J. lived for a long time with insufferable depression. R.'s mother J. would wake up very early in the morning and fear that she would not be able to get up. R.'s mother J. would feel so depressed she would be physically sick. R.'s mother J. was afraid that her

depression would prevent her from taking care of her children or that she would create this facade of taking care of her children but she wouldn't really be taking care of them. R.'s mother J. is a large and strong woman; she is athletic, intelligent, sensitive and capable. It took R.'s mother J. a long time to believe that she had the power to get up in the morning to take care of herself and her children. R.'s mother J. once threatened to jump out of the car because R.'s father was driving drunk again. R. always believed that her father was trying to kill them. R. was convinced that her mother J. was really going to jump out of the car and leave her with her father who was trying to kill them. After they were home R. repeatedly asked her mother J. if she really would have jumped out of the car. R.'s mother J. assured her that she only would have done it if she could have taken her children with her. That night R. slept with her mother J. and R.'s father slept downstairs on the couch.

C.'s mother M. used to brag about C. to her friends. She often exaggerates C.'s accomplishments. C.'s mother M. is very threatened by all of C.'s ideas and achievements. C.'s mother M. contributed to C.'s achievements by her sacrifices. She read to C. by the hour when she was small. C.'s mother M. has contributed to C.'s success by her failures. C.'s mother M. is afraid C. is going to suffer from being strong and single-minded. C.'s mother M. has contributed to C.'s strength through a passionate and intensive faith in her. C.'s mother M. loves her very much. C. hates her mother M. and is sure that her mother is determined to destroy her. She exaggerates this hatred in order to protect herself from identifying with her mother M., who she perceives as a defeated person. Recently however, in an unguarded moment, C. felt overwhelmed with compassion and gratitude towards her mother. It was a tremendous relief to C. to feel compassionate towards her mother. C. identifies with her father. Her father embodies and symbolizes intellectual freedom, economic independence, and the ability to reason and articulate. To identify with her mother means destruction and defeat but to identify with her father means she betrays her mother, who loves her very much.

K.'s mother K. always talked to K. about most things but never showed extreme emotion or despair. K.'s mother K. never cries. K. doesn't cry. It doesn't make K. feel better to cry, so she doesn't. The only time K. feels near tears is when she is talking or thinking about her mother K. When K. went away to college she had to leave her mother K. It was the most difficult thing K. ever had to do in her life. It has been the hardest separation, but the four years of K.'s college education have separated her permanently from her mother. K. often fantasizes about being reunited with her mother K. She jokes about her mother coming to live with her. She jokes about moving back to Buffalo, New York, to live with her mother K. when she gets old. K.'s mother K. didn't send her a valentine this year. K. fears that her mother will stop loving her if she tells her she is a lesbian. K. fears that this is the one thing that would come between her and her mother K., although her mother K. loves her very much. Recently K. started work as a carpenter. She used to be a waitress. Working as a carpenter makes her feel odd because her father is a carpenter. When she is having a particular problem she swears, muttering to herself, and swings her hammer recklessly.

This behavior reminds her of her father and she fears being ridiculous like her father. Identification with her father is dangerous and oppressive to her, but carpentry pays better than waitressing and is more gratifying.

R. sometimes cried when she was a child for reasons unknown to anybody else. R.'s mother J. would comfort and soothe her but R.'s heightened sense of pain perplexed her mother J. R. used to cry sometimes and get hysterical. She would panic and have trouble breathing. R.'s mother J. would come to her room and hold her and R. would listen intently to the beating of her mother J.'s heart. R. was terribly afraid that her mother J.'s heart would stop beating and her mother J. would be dead. Once when R. was twelve she went away to camp and was hysterically homesick. She panicked. She was afraid that she was going to have to either jump over the balcony or go home. Both choices were frightening and humiliating. R.'s mother J. came to see her and convinced her to stay at camp. R. had been afraid that her mother J. would be overcome with guilt and allow her to go home. R. was afraid that her mother J. needed her as much as R. needed her mother J. and that kind of bond would be terrible and terrifying. But her mother J. was very calm and talked to R. quite normally. Her mother J. instilled her with strength. Her mother J. took her to Great Barrington to visit a friend for the day and they went for a walk beside the lake. R.'s panic went away. R. went back to camp for two weeks and had a pretty good time. R. was grateful to her mother and proud of being able to stay at camp.

C.'s mother M. punished her severely once for lying about spraying her friend with moth killer. C. was afraid of being punished for what she had done so she lied about it. Her mother explained to her very carefully that she was not being punished for spraying her friend with moth killer but she was being punished for lying. C. always felt very guilty about lying but she compulsively told stories to make her life more exciting, to present herself in a better light, to exonerate herself, to present herself as someone else, and to protect herself. She was terribly sensitive to the opinion of others and spent a lot of time figuring out what was expected of her. Nevertheless C. was naughty, mischievous and disobedient. C.'s mother M. both encouraged her and punished her when she was bad.

K. was always a very good girl like her mother K. was when she was young. K. never had any real conflict about being good. It hardly ever occurred to her to be bad. It almost always made sense to be good to help and please her mother K. When K.'s mother K. worked in the Post Office K. would take care of the younger children and make sure they got to school. K.'s mother K. used to prepare dinner and serve it to her family. When there weren't always enough places at the table her mother K. would stand while everyone else ate. Nothing would induce K.'s mother K. to sit with the rest of them until K. stood and ate beside her mother K. Then her mother K. saw how ridiculous it was and sat down with the rest of them to eat. K. wants to protect her mother from the deprivations of working class life. K.'s mother K. never wants or will take anything for herself. She spends all her money on her children. K.'s sister once remarked to K. that there was no way one could ever repay Mom. K. thinks she is right. K. is eternally grateful to her mother K.

R. at times has been her mother J.'s friend and confi-

dant. When R.'s mother J. was getting her separation and divorce R. would come home from school on vacations and she and her mother J. would have long talks about the situation. They would cry together. R.'s mother J. told R. that she never felt as intelligent or as capable as R.'s father although now she realized that she was. R. had known this for a long time. R.'s mother J. told R. that she finally realized that their friends as a couple were really her friends. R.'s mother J. asked R.'s advice about breaking the news to R.'s younger sister. R. was the first to know. R.'s mother J.'s divorce was long overdue. R. was relieved that it finally happened. It made both R. and her mother J. feel autonomous. Two years after her mother J.'s separation R. told her mother that she is a lesbian. R. felt that her mother R.'s not knowing was a prevarication not befitting their relationship. R. knew that this would not please her mother J. and it was the first time that she had ever consciously displeased her mother J. Telling this to her mother J. created a certain distance and caution in their relationship, but R. feels that this is, for the time being, a necessary relief.

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C.'s mother M., K.'s mother K., and R.'s mother J. are afraid that C., K., and R. will suffer from not being loved by men. C.'s mother M., K.'s mother K., and R.'s mother J. have suffered mostly in their lives from the loving of men. It is a strain this thing called loving of men because it means the serving of men and their interests. Having sacrificed their lives they also want to sacrifice the lives of their daughters. Limited in their choices they see the extension of their history through their daughter's lives as logical, natural, and inevitable. C., K., and R. reject this and hurt their mothers' feelings. They reject their mothers and separate themselves to avoid identifying with their mothers. They feel guilty when they hurt and reject their mothers and their mothers' notions of their lives. Life is about sacrifice and giving of self. Life is not complete without the loving of men.

C.'s mother M., K.'s mother K., and R.'s mother J. are afraid that C., K., and R. will suffer by loving men. They say that their husbands and men in general are selfish, insensitive, and incompetent. They have warned C., K., and R. that men are dangerous and ruinous and can hurt and maim. More often they say that men are ridiculous.

C., K., and R. say that men are selfish, insensitive, and incompetent. They tell their mothers that men are dangerous and ruinous and have hurt and maimed. More often they say that men are ridiculous. Their mothers feel guilty about denigrating men to their daughters. They reconsider. Not all men are so bad as their husbands. Even their husbands are not so bad—not quite so bad as they might have previously indicated in a moment of unguarded anger or frustration. Nothing is so bad as hearing their daughters denigrate men so severely, thereby ruining their chances for happiness through the loving of men. Twenty or thirty years of marriage with someone who is selfish and incompetent was really not so bad. These were their lives and they

able language for sharing ideas, but as yet they are often mute. Their silence both protects and isolates them.

Rather than pledge themselves to love they have pledged themselves to their work and they romanticize about their commitment as diligently as others romanticize about love. They resign themselves to the clarity of loneliness as others resign themselves to the confusion of love. And for the same reason: they see no other way to live. It has become a noble idea. They will, however, probably be no lonelier than others, nor will they love less, nor be loved less. It confuses their mothers sometimes that they refuse to dedicate themselves to love. Their daughters cynicism is cryptic. They can't understand what caused it, although they above all should know.

C., K., and R. are interested in what they euphemistically call "the work"; ie. painting and literature, a body of feminist/socialist ideas, as yet ill-defined and inchoate. These interests take a certain responsibility from the role of love in their lives. They prefer to depend on friendship, for after investing in a friendship for awhile it seems more dependable and sometimes more interesting than love and investing in love takes energy from their work. Not investing in love, however, closes them up, limits their vision, narrows their experience and eventually takes energy from their work. They try maintaining a balance somehow between love, friendship and work. As in any triangle, however, one is always betrayed: the love, the friendship or the work. At any given moment one of these things is in some way betrayed; one of these things is always a usurper, uncontrolled and recalcitrant. The idea is to integrate and coalesce, but the difference between the conception and the reality is often great. There is conflict. They dream. They fantasize. They talk a lot. They discuss these things and they think about them diligently.

There is a joke among C., K., and R. about the pilfering of ideas as if there were too few to go around. This joke is a parody of professional competitiveness. They have seen it often among the Artists, and they

were educated in an environment where this concept of sacrosanct Idea—pure in its divorce from personal feeling, large and conceptual and abstract—prevailed. Naturally the Idea is coveted. The Idea is the means to recognition. What they have been painfully conscious of is that they are afraid that their ideas are poor and at the same time that someone might steal their not so good ideas and perhaps put them to some better use or make them somehow seem more glorious than they can make them. They protect them by casually intimating their subject matter for certain projects and by announcing certain intentions and by staking claim to certain contents and constructs. They want to be both original and brilliant. They want individual recognition. This joke about the pilfering of ideas rests a little uncomfortably with them. If most of the professional recognition (and with it, money) is for men and women's ideas aren't pure anyway then what morsels or esteem are left to split amongst them? Who gets what? But what they also realize is that they are forging with their lives a collective of ideas, a new concept of idea; perhaps even an ideology. By implementing their ideology they will beget a forum. They will recognize themselves. Whereas their mothers suffered in isolation, without hope of individual recognition, without support and without ever being taken seriously, they have in their small circles, intermingled with their political struggles, a wealth of information and a beginning of a counter system. Their hope is that they don't ponder alone, that their ideas belong not to any one of them, but to all of them at once. That which one of them can't articulate in a moment, another of them will in the next.

What interests them most is that which is not yet expressed; ideas that have not yet found words, a body of experience and a system of education whose processes are not impaired (at least at the instance of conception) by the dogma of male institutions. It is the Little World, this interaction between them, and it is their opportunity and the purpose of their lives to endow the Little World with the credence and magnitude ordinarily attributed only to the Big World.

*Christine Wade is a painter and computer programmer who lives in New York City.*

Thanks to Barbara Grossman for permission to quote the last lines of her poem "I Am Strong."

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The criteria for the entries below are: 1) that books and articles be pertinent to the subject of lesbian artists, 2) that monographical material that doesn't at least acknowledge an artist or artists as lesbian(s) were usually excluded, 3) that the authors are not necessarily lesbians, 4) that some books and articles do not specifically deal with lesbianism but come from what I considered to be a specifically lesbian point of view, 5) that entries are limited to the subjects of visual art and writing.

I found a lot of material that I had forgotten or had been unaware of just as this was going to the typesetter. I also didn't have time to do any research on historical artists (or contemporary, for that matter) who I didn't know to be lesbians. This list can just be viewed as a sampling of easily accessible information. I hope it grows.

Thanks especially to the Lesbian Herstory Archives for existing, and for being the main reference library available to me as a lesbian.

Amy Sillman

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Louise Bourgeois  
Judith Brodsky

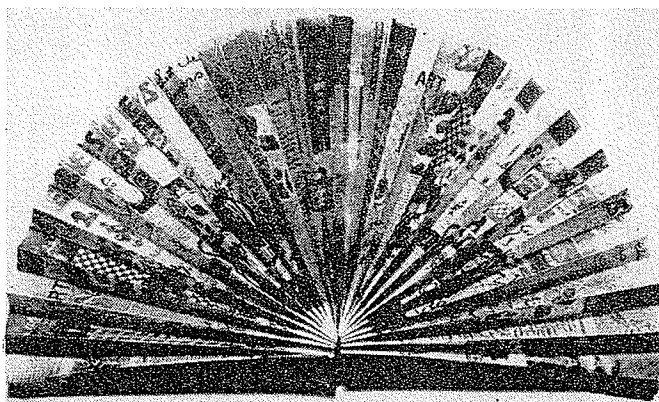
Kathy Carrido  
Liza Cowan  
Everson Art Museum  
Lenore Friedrich  
Ann Harris  
Sylvia and Irving Kleinman  
Ida Kohlmeier

Estelle Leontief  
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# WE ARE SOLICITING MATERIAL FOR THE NEXT THREE ISSUES OF HERESIES.

**Women's Traditional Arts and Artmaking:** decoration, pattern ritual, repetition, opulence, self-ornamentation; arts of non-Western women; the effect of industrialization on women's work and work processes; female origins of collage: scrapbooks, collections, photo-montage; oral histories of craftswomen with photographic documentation; the politics of aesthetics; breaking down barriers between the fine and the decorative arts, the exclusion of women's traditional arts from the mainstream of art history...

*Deadline: September 30, 1977.*

**The Great Goddess/Women's Spirituality:** common bondings in the new mythology; ritual and the collective woman; avoiding limitations in our self-defining process; recipes and wisdom from country "spirit women"; the Goddess vs. the patriarchy; the Goddess movement abroad; hostility against and fear of the Goddess; original researches; locating the Goddess-temples, museums, digs, bibliographies, maps; the new/old holydays; healing; reports on the feminist spirituality movement; political implications of the Goddess; psychological impact on women of female-centered spirituality; Goddess images and symbols...

*Deadline: mid-December, 1977.*

**Women and Violence:** Possible topics: *Cultural:* violence against women in mass media, literature and art; women's self image... *Family:* wife beating; child abuse; sexual molestation; violence among lovers and friends... *Institutionalized:* incarceration in prisons and mental hospitals; psychological and physical repression in traditional religions; racism; imperialism and economic deprivation; torture of political prisoners; sterilization abuse; homophobia; rape... *Rebellion:* feminism as an act of self-defense; revolutionary struggles; organizing against violence in the media; art which explores violence; art-making as an aggressive act... This issue may have a particular focus on Latin America.

*Deadline: mid-February, 1978.*

**Guidelines for Prospective Contributors:** Manuscripts (any length) should be typewritten, double-spaced on 8 1/2" x 11" paper and submitted in duplicate with footnotes and illustrative material, if any, fully captioned. We welcome for consideration either outlines or descriptions of proposed articles. Writers should feel free to inquire about the possibilities of an article. If you are submitting visual material, please send a photograph, xerox, or description—not the original. HERESIES will not take responsibility for unsolicited original material. All manuscripts and visual material must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. HERESIES will pay a fee between \$5 and \$50, as our budget allows for published material, and we hope to offer higher fees in the future. There will be no commissioned articles and we cannot guarantee acceptance of submitted material. We will not include reviews or monographs on contemporary women.

**THE LESBIAN HERSTORY ARCHIVES** is both a library and a family album, attempting to preserve records of lesbian lives and activities so that future generations of lesbians will have ready access to materials relevant to their lives. The process of gathering material serves to uncover and collect our herstory, denied to us previously by patriarchal historians in the interest of the culture they serve. The archives include old and new books, journals, articles, by lesbians, as well as any material dealing with the lives and work of lesbians, such as interviews, photographs, letters, announcements, posters, etc. Lesbian Herstory Archives, 215 W. 92nd St. Apt. 13A, N.Y.C.

**SLIDE REGISTRY OF LESBIAN ARTISTS.** In trying to document the work of lesbian artists I am collecting slides of work by past and contemporary lesbian visual artists. This collection will be housed and available for viewing at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City. Please send one or two slides of your work or that of other lesbian artists to Harmony Hammond, 129 West 22nd St., N.Y.C. 10011. If you can donate the slides, great, if not, send a SASE and I will make duplicates and return your originals. Please label each slide with the following information: artist's name, title of work, media, date of work, and indicate top of piece.

**PROJECT ON THE HISTORY AND MEANING OF LESBIAN ART AND LESBIAN SENSIBILITY.** A three year multi-faceted project on the history and meaning of lesbian art and lesbian sensibility will be conducted by members of the Feminist Studio Workshop, beginning in the Fall of 1977. The project will gather information about lesbian creators of the past, explore lesbian sensibility through the group process of participants in the project, compile archives and a slide registry, and interview contemporary lesbian artists on audio and video tape. Further information may be obtained from the Feminist Studio Workshop, The Women's Building, 1727 N. Spring St., L.A., Ca., 90012, atten: History and Meaning of Lesbian Art.

**Errata: Second issue of HERESIES.**

On page 62, the journal entry #10 by Reeva Potoff was mistakenly printed upside down.

On page 124, "Doing the Laundry," by Mierle Laderman Ukeles was printed sideways. Our apologies for these errors.

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